

6 はい、いっしょに参ります

これは  
ゾンビ  
ですか？

木村心一

Shinichi Kimura



フタノアシア文庫

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IS THIS A  
Zombie?

◀ Saras

YES,  
THIS IS A  
CRANK-IN

Well then, everyone. The **crappy movie** I'm introducing this time is a disaster movie.

The movie starts with us **youthful girls** heading for a **watermelon splitting contest**.

And then we come under attack from a **mysterious creature**... well, it's a zombie. So the girls run into the sea, but then they're attacked by a **shark**.

But the **punchline** is that the shark turns out to be one of the **contestants in the watermelon splitting contest**, and he saves them from the zombie.

So instead of the **watermelon** they break open the **zombie's head** instead. **The end.**

And that's a summary of this ridicu-... oops, can't say that. **It's a super interesting B movie worth a grand total of 30 points. Farewell farewell farewell!!**



JAWS AND ZOMBIES AND SOMETIMES DAD

The battle of the century begins now!  
The #1 situational disaster movie in the Majihama Reranking List has finally descended upon us!

You can't escape from  
this appetite.  
Huge. Just huge.  
What will humans break, and  
what will they be broken by?  
The screams of young girls  
heat up the summer air.  
There are official rules to  
watermelon splitting too!

<<Sera

Yuu>

# SwikaWari

— Jaws and Zombies and sometimes Dad —\*



"If you don't cry  
after this movie,  
you're not human."  
(14 y.o. / female / masou shoujo)



"I've started putting  
shiso dressing on  
my watermelon."  
(16 y.o. / female / high school student)



"Eh? Can you really  
split the watermelon  
with only 5 minutes of  
training a day?"  
(16 y.o. / four-eyes / trash)



"Shark fin is  
the best!"  
(trash)

\* Reference to the movie Tokyo Tower: Mom and Me and Sometimes Dad



Haruna ✓

Shake hands with Haruna-chan in the movie theater!!

Haruna: So, that's the movie I want to make!

**Ayumu:** Why the hell is "dad" in the title? And what's with this end-of-the-world feel you have going? And the first person to talk also spoiled the entire story didn't she?!

Haruna: Well, it'd ruin it if I showed you everything.

**Ayumu:** Also, what's with this poster? Did you use pads or something?

Haruna: This is how I always look! I'm a D-cup, okay?!

**Ayumu:** Anyways, back to the drawing board. Think of another movie idea.

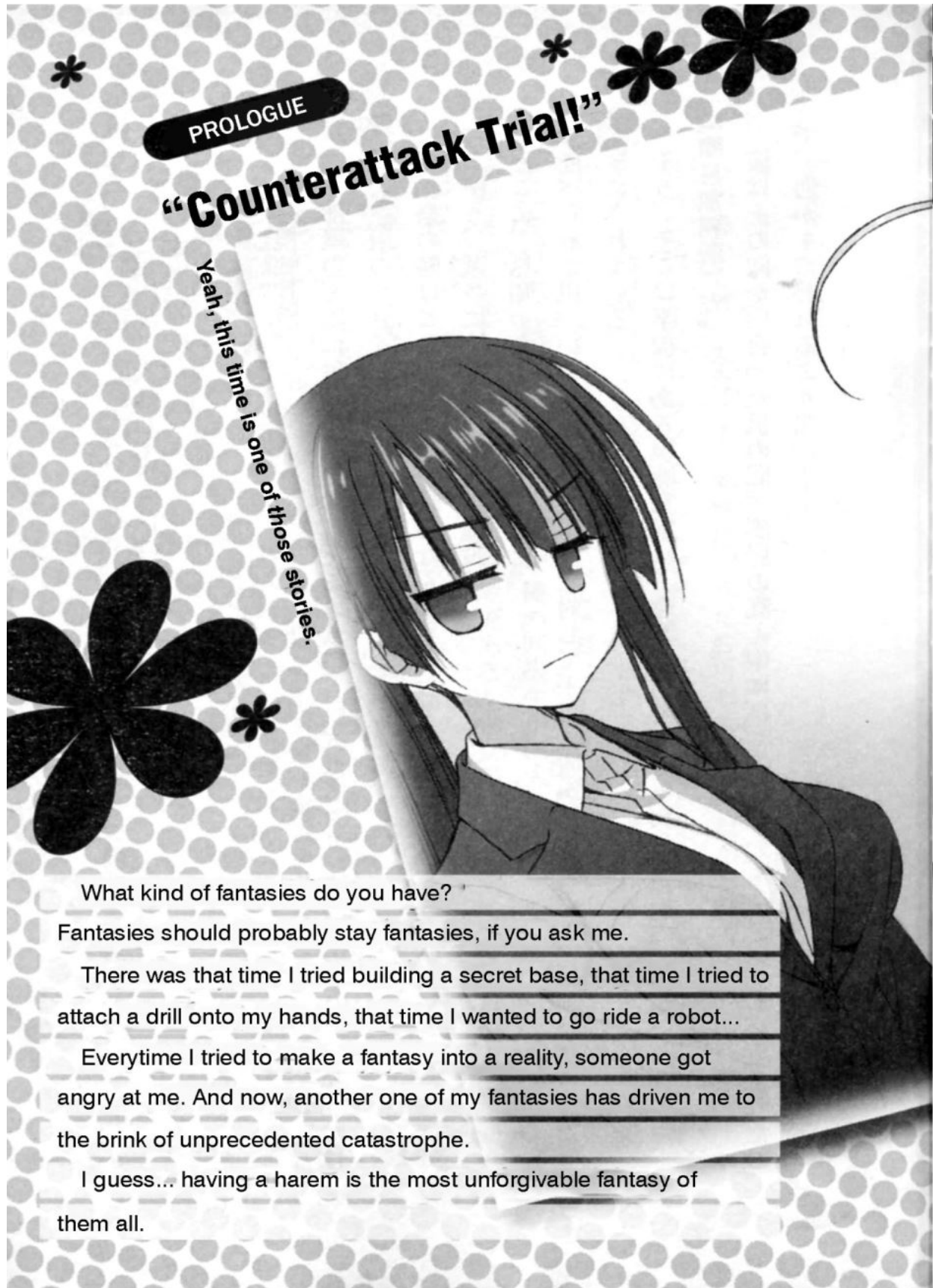
Haruna: Okay, how about this instead?

**Ayumu:** Hm? Which?

Haruna: Aikawa Ayumu. Sexual Harassment Courtroom.

◀ "Why me? How did it come to this?!" The plot reaches its tipping point! Arrest the accused and let's get to the story!





PROLOGUE

“Counterattack Trial!”

Yeah, this time is one of those stories.

What kind of fantasies do you have?

Fantasies should probably stay fantasies, if you ask me.

There was that time I tried building a secret base, that time I tried to attach a drill onto my hands, that time I wanted to go ride a robot...

Everytime I tried to make a fantasy into a reality, someone got angry at me. And now, another one of my fantasies has driven me to the brink of unprecedented catastrophe.

I guess... having a harem is the most unforgivable fantasy of them all.







### Prologue – Counterattack Trial!

#### Prologue

“Would the accused, Aikawa Ayumu, please enter the courtroom?”

-

Called by that beautiful voice, I stepped into *that place*.

We were in the school’s A/V room.

A huge screen was spread out so that everybody in the big room could see it, and in front of the screen were VCRs and projectors meant for teachers to use for class.

During the culture festival, they were using this room for movie shows. But usually, this room was only used for some random research seminars, so it was usually free.

I could see a few familiar faces in this room today.



There were many desks lined up in the room. Usually, the desks would be lined up parallel to the screen, but today there were two desks facing each other, and lined up front to back.

Yes, they had fashioned an emergency, half-assed courtroom in this A/V room. You could say we were in a “Summary Court” if you wanted to<sup>1</sup>.

I was in between those two desks which were facing each other. I was in a chair that had been plopped right in the center of the room, so before anybody said anything to me...

“I’ve done nothing wrong.”

*Bang bang.*

“Shut up, don’t talk! Nobody’s given you any permission to talk!”

A single girl stood up at the teacher’s platform, her body wrapped in a black outfit that looked like she had stolen it right from Francisco Xavier. She was 1.45 meters tall, had big, catlike eyes, and this brat who looked no older than a middle schooler was serving as today’s presiding judge. She was probably the worst person in the world to be put in charge of a trial...

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<sup>1</sup> In Japanese, summary court is translated to “kan’i saibansho,” which literally translates to “simple courtroom.” So there is a pun here.



Sitting on her left and right were people who were probably the jury. There were four of my classmates there, as well as one of the freeloaders staying in my house.

There was also a girl sitting in a seat on the judge's right hand side, who probably was acting as the prosecutor. She called out to me.

"Name?"

Her voice rang clearly through the air. She was probably the one who had called me earlier. She must've been really angry, considering the judge was usually the person who called the accused to the stand.

She had black hair and a ponytail. A suit was hiding her model-like proportions.

"Well, uhh... I think you already know my name..."

*Bang bang.*

"Stop complaining and answer the question!"

The judge shouted and pounded a hammer onto what looked like one of those red ink pads people used with their signature seals. They probably couldn't find a proper gavel on short notice.



A juror next to this girl was awaiting further instructions. She had silver hair and was wearing a set of plate armor and gauntlets. She passed me a memo.

**We must establish your identity. Answer the question.**

If even she was saying that, then I guess I had no choice. I dutifully gave my name.

“... I’m Aikawa Ayumu.”

“Age, occupation? Death penalty!”

The judge clicked her tongue and asked me more questions. For some reason... I get the feeling that she had also already passed judgment on me... but that can’t couldn’t be. Yeah.

“Sixteen. High school student.”

A few days had passed since we had gone to a mixer with Kyouko in order to find out how to beat Chris, the masou shoujo who had stolen Haruna’s magical energy.

Today was the sixteenth day of December, and a Saturday, so there wasn’t supposed to be any school. But I was suddenly summoned, and when I got there I was treated to this stupid randomness.



“Do we really have time for this? Shouldn’t we be training to beat Chris or getting information or something? There are plenty of other things to do.”

I muttered that, which caused the ponytailed girl to narrow her eyes and glare at me.

“It is almost the New Year. If we don’t reflect on all the things you’ve done over the past half year, then we can’t proceed in good faith. Thus, Tthis trial is thus necessary.”

It seemed that they wouldn’t be happy unless we did went through with this trial... geez.

“Fine fine. Let’s just get it over with.”

The ponytailed girl took a few documents in her hand and stood up.

“Well then, please allow me to read the indictment out loud. Official Indictment. The accused, Aikawa Ayumu, has continued committing multiple acts of sexual harassment to this date. We claim that these acts are excessively vulgar, and are asking the honorable judge to pass down the death penalty.”

“Don’t just read out the indictment and then immediately demand sentencing!”



*Bang bang.*

“Death by Phalaris’s Cow!”

They were going to use a terrifying torture device from ancient Greece to carry out the sentence?

The judge was being completely useless, so the silver-haired girl passed me a memo to get things moving along.

**The accused has the right to silence. He has the right to not say anything that may prove to his disadvantage.**

“Okay.” Maybe we should switch the judges right now? Wouldn’t that be better?

**In response to the indictment read out by the prosecutor, how do you plead?**

“Umm, not guilty.”

“Okay, looks like it’s a good time for the defense to come in then!”



The judge announced that, and my lawyer walked in. She was a boyish-looking girl wearing a sailor's uniform. Instead of bringing in law books, she was holding a Japanese dictionary...

"Aikawa is a perv, but he's definitely not an old man who goes around sexually harassing everything!"

That was the first thing this short-haired, sailor-uniformed girl loudly said as soon as she walked into the room.

"... Y-You're my lawyer?! I'm not sure about this! Don't let an idiot defend me!"

**Well then, the prosecution may begin presenting arguments.**

"Okay... the prosecution plans to show that the accused, Aikawa Ayumu, is an extremely vulgar piece of trash, more revolting than a stink bug, and akin to the disgusting dandruff that falls on your shoulders. Our evidence will attest to that."

It seemed that they had chosen the A/V room to be converted into a courtroom so we could show videos on screen.

"I object!"

The short-haired girl sharply pointed her index finger at the ponytailed girl.

“Hueh? Object to what?” Both the judge and I had our mouths open with surprise.

“Ah, nothing! I just wanted to try saying that!”

*Teehee. Sorry about that!* The short-haired girl seemed to be saying that as she bowed her head slightly.

“Okay then. Overruled.”

“I object to this girl being my lawyer!”



## CHAPTER 1

Yeah, this time is one of those stories.

**“Cost of a Swimsuit:  
Priceless.”**

Allow me to introduce myself. I am Aikawa Ayumu,  
and I am a zombie. Why did I become a zombie, you ask?

Fufufu, quite a good question, that is.

"Ayumu, where did you put the seven spice mix?"

First there were seven-spice incidents that... wait, huh?

"Ayumu! Did you forget to buy shirataki?!"

I then went to the store to buy some shira-... wait, did I?

"Ayumu. Come cut X's into the shiitake."

See, a serial murderer cut an X to lots of people and-

"Ayumu! Where's Nessie, by the way?"

Ugh, again?! Where does Nessie fit in any of this?!





**Chapter 1 – Cost of a Swimsuit: Priceless****Chapter 1: Part 1**

Around halfway through August, I began to want to do more summer-like things. Sure, lots of stuff had happened and I had been spending the majority of the summer fighting monsters, but that didn't really feel "summer-like."

So, what do you think of when I say "summer-like"? I asked that to all the freeloaders at my house.

"You're saying that I'm the best, prettiest nabe master ever!"<sup>1</sup>

The person who suggested that summer meant nabe was the most spoiled girl living in this house. She sat to my right and tussled with her ahoge while putting all the nabe meat at a place where she could grab it easily. No, you're not a nabe cook... you're a masou shoujo.

"Haruna, please pass us the ponzu. Hellscythe-dono dislikes the sesame sauce."

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<sup>1</sup> A dish where people dump raw meats and vegetables into a pot of boiling water or soup base.

The ponytailed girl, wearing a dignified, ninja-like expression, spoke up to the masou shoujo while ladling out the layer of stuff that had formed on top of the soup. Haruna crossed her arms and stood her ground, showing no signs of wanting to pass the ponzu.

“Ayumu, please pass the ponzu to Hellscythe-dono.”

Sera, the ponytailed ninja, just turned to me without even stopping to scold Haruna. Hey, why was she glaring at *me*?

I turned to the doll-like silver-haired girl on my left and poured ponzu into her plate. Her crystal-clear, blue eyes didn't blink as they turned to aim at the piles of meat that Haruna had pulled towards herself.

She was as meek as an herbivore, and as quiet as the still water surface above a calm pond, and was mysteriously wearing armor and gauntlets even though we were indoors. Her name was Eucliwood Hellscythe. She was a necromancer who had come from the Underworld, and also the person who had brought me back to life.

Yes, I had already died once.

Sera took a few vegetables and distributed them while Haruna only went for the meat. When Sera tried to grab some meat...



“What do you think you’re doing? I’m the nabe master!”

She would guard against Sera’s attempts like that. It seemed that when she said “nabe master,” she didn’t mean the person who was in charge of running the nabe pot, but the person who had some kind of special right to hoard all the meat for herself.

The person who actually *was* running the pot was the vampire ninja, Sera. She still had a cold, serious look in her eyes, but her lips were a bit upturned and she seemed to be having fun, so I spoke up to her.

“You sure like nabe, don’t you?”

“Yes. Now and then, I eat at the nabe shop in front of the station.”

“Ahh, that’s a pretty good place. Maybe we should go together next time.”

“Hah, you must be joking. Your face is enough of a joke, so I don’t need them to come out of your mouth too.”

Sera laughed coldly, and her words pierced through my heart. Yeah, her words sure felt like blades sometimes.

“Anyways, if you want meat, then you’re going to have to show you have powers that are more suitable for meat than being a nabe master!”

What the hell kind of logic was that? Haruna gave out an arrogant grin, while Sera cocked her neck to the side before muttering,

“I... see. Well, people say I’m a sunny girl.”

Well, that was half-assed. Seemed like she thought about it but couldn’t come up with anything.

“Seriously?! So, you have command over the weather... okay, you can have some meat!”

I have no idea what kinds of standards she was using. Also, Sera-san, why is it that you’ve been distributing food to everyone’s plate but mine?

I suddenly realized that Yuu was really staring at that meat while she stuffed her cheeks with bok choy. She had a pretty docile personality, but she did like her meat.

“Haruna, that meat is for everyone, okay? Come on, give some to Yuu.”



“Why? Even if the gloomy necromancer eats meat all she’s going to do is sit in one place in the house, right?!”

Both Sera and I stiffened at Haruna’s words. Did Haruna not like Yuu or something?

It seemed that to acquire the meat, Yuu would have to come up with an alias like Sera had. So, Yuu took out her trusty memo pad and spelled out a sentence.

**My teacher, the Water Mirror, once told me that I could rule the world if I acquired the Hidden Dragon or the Young Phoenix.<sup>2</sup>**

Wait, what did that have to do with Yuu? Sure, those were all pretty cool-sounding words, but none of them were relevant, right?

“Bowling dragon... acquiring a bowling dragon...” Haruna seemed to be troubled, until finally...

“I’m not sure what that means, but it’s no good!”

Haruna made a cross symbol with her arms.<sup>3</sup> The two girls glared at each other. Sera just gave out a resigned look and continued distributing the vegetables.

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to the Japanese fairy tale of Urashima Tarou, which involves a fisherman who saves a princess and is taken to a castle at the bottom of the sea.

<sup>3</sup> This is the standard symbol for “no” in Japan.

Yuu's gauntleted hand went for a piece of meat with her chopsticks, but it was blocked by Haruna.

The two chopsticks clanged together in midair. They seemed to stop still then, but from the fireworks that were going off in the room, I could tell they were having an intense attack and defense battle.

Haruna and Yuu really weren't very compatible. Haruna was a masou shoujo who came from the magical world Virie; Yuu was a necromancer who had come from the Underworld. Virie and the Underworld were hostile towards each other.

They came from two opposing powers, so it wouldn't be a surprise if they weren't very compatible.

So, why were these two here, poking at a nabe pot? Well, to put it concisely, all I can say is that all these girls had intruded into my life and straight into my home for some reason or other.

Also, to be honest, it probably wasn't because of some random war going on in the world, and simply because their personalities were pretty incompatible.

While I thought about all this, I took Haruna's plate with all its meat and moved it towards Yuu.

"Agh! Hey, you moron!"

In her fury, her ahoge turned into the shape of a lightning bolt, and Haruna splashed some of the boiling water from the pot right into my face.

“H-Hoottt!!”

This bastard... maybe I'll stick a damn enoki mushroom up her nose... but while I looked around the table, I stopped.

Now that Yuu had acquired her meat, she was sitting there as emotionless as always, but to me she seemed happy. Seeing Yuu like that just filled me with a pleasant feeling, and I found it hard to stay angry at Haruna anymore.

Come on, we had to at least try and enjoy this nabe here... why was Haruna always so selfish and cold towards Yuu? I sighed resignedly and reached my chopsticks out to grab some shiitake.

“Ayumu, please don't put your chopsticks into the pot! That's disgusting!”

Sera's eyes opened wide in surprise as she swatted my hand away like it was some fly. You really don't have to get that worked up over it.

“So, Ayumu, what kind of alias do you have? If it's amazing, I'll give you some shiitake!”



So, I had to come up with an alias even for vegetables? Ugh. Well, whatever. Wait until they hear what I have to say. I put on an invincible smile and pointed my thumb at myself.

“I’m... a zombie.”

*Ugh, that’s sickening...* is the feeling I was getting from Sera’s expression.

That day, I ended up buying food from a convenience store for dinner.

**Chapter 1: Part 2**

Everything could be given a rarity.

And really, there were three classes of rarity: common (you can find it everywhere), uncommon (you can't find it everywhere), and rare (you almost can't find it anywhere). And the rarer something is, the more valuable it is.

You can apply this logic not only to things, but also to events.

As for me, I had three freeloaders in my house: the magic-user and masou shoujo Haruna who came from another world, the necromancer Yuu who had come from the underworld, and the vampire ninja Sera who had been in Japan since ancient times. Everything had begun when I was killed, but to put it simply, this was quite a "rare" experience, and I had become quite a "rare" combination of zombie and masou shoujo. The thought that these rare experiences must be quite valuable. Almost brought me to tears.

I was forced to go on these random monster-exterminating missions and was led around by the nose by these girls, and I found out that once you got used to rare experiences, they just became common. But just when I was about to lose the ability to feel the novelty in anything anymore, a quite strange thing happened.

**I would like to go to the pool.**

It wasn't Haruna or Sera who uttered those words... no, it was Yuu.

I was so used to seeing Yuu just sitting in our living room, drinking tea, and watching TV. This was the first time she had written me a memo about wanting to go *anywhere*. Maybe she was still thinking about when Haruna claimed that all she did was sit in one place. Yeah, I definitely wanted to take her to the pool...

But, I wasn't very knowledgeable when it came to places of leisure like that, so I ended up asking my classmate Orito for advice on where to go.

When I did that, I heard that there was a newly-built pool that was holding quite a rare event, so we ended up going to that pool immediately.

They had a warm-water pool, a flowing pool, a water slide, a waterfall... it was quite a well-equipped pool, with all the amenities you could possibly want.

I was lying sprawled out in a plastic deck chair (which was pretty impossible to actually sleep in, by the way), and waiting for Yuu to finish changing.

"Aikawaaa, what's up with that pose? You're the worst."

This dull-looking guy with the spiky hairstyle and glasses was Orito, and he was shaking his head while looking down at me. He was wearing what looked disgustingly like a "prince on a white horse" outfit. Wow, dressing up like an endangered species like that...



Anyways, this guy was my classmate, and he was a genuinely average human with no rarity at all. He was the only person who knew where this place was, so I brought him along. That was the only reason.

“What’s wrong with wearing a swimsuit at the pool?”

The event that this pool was holding was something like a costume party. Even the lifeguards and shopkeepers were in cosplay. There were even people in what looked close to bikini armor or naked apron outfits here, enjoying the pool.

But it’s not like you had to put on a costume to be here.

I really should’ve asked about this beforehand. If I knew this was a cosplay event, then I wouldn’t have come.

But well... you could cosplay and go into a pool and nobody would get mad at you. I guess that did sound a bit fun.

“Aikawa Aikawa, if you don’t enjoy yourself here, then you won’t have many other chances to cosplay.”

I see. To all these other people, just being able to cosplay counted as a rare event.

But to me... to me, cosplay was... ugh, I felt the tears coming!

As if I was about to do some ab exercises, I suddenly found a basketball-sized beach ball thrown on top of my stomach. There was only one person I knew who could launch an attack as sudden as this.

“Ayumu! It’s pretty amazing here!”

She had chestnut hair and big catlike eyes. This tiny girl, who only was 1.4554m tall, gave me a smile.

Usually, I would’ve yelled at her in a situation like this.

But, I instead had my breath taken away. I couldn’t help but be mesmerized by this girl wearing a pair of shorts above over her swimsuit.

Her ahoge waved back and forth above her chestnut hair,. aAnd I assume thea long tail that was wagging behind her shorts was part of her cosplay outfit.

Her white skin was even more dazzling than normal, and her slender arms and small butt were quitek attractive. Her soft-looking thighs and calves also gave her quite a suitable amount of charm for a girl her size.

And then, there were her small, modest breasts, which were apologetically asserting themselves on her... hm?

“W-What are you doing... stop staring.”

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, almost as if she was trying to launch a Cross Arm Dive<sup>1</sup>, and then she stared at me. Well, I admittedly I was looking her up and down and all over right then, so I guess I can't blame her for reacting like this. Even now, I'm just continuing to stare at her breasts.

“Were your breasts really that big before?”

“I-I tied them up a bit!”

Ah, I see. When I saw Haruna with her lips thinned and her cheeks flushed like that, I really lost my desire to get angry at her.

“But she sure does have small breasts...”

Orito said that casually. Well, fine, but I didn't care about that. And Orito should've stopped right there.

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<sup>1</sup> One of Nam's attacks from Dragonball.



“Having small breasts is pretty rare, but also pretty worthless...”

I gave Orito a compassionate look. That was a fatal mistake. Meanwhile, Haruna put her hands on each shoulder of Orito’s prince outfit, and...

“Don’t screw with meeeee!!”

A ripping sound echoed through the air, and she tore his outfit from top to bottom without an ounce of mercy. Orito hugged his body and collapsed to the ground in tears, like a girl who was about to get sexually assaulted.

“T-That was a rental...”

That’s why he was crying?! I guess I should get angry at Haruna here too, but I really couldn’t sympathize with Orito’s opinion that little breasts were worthless.

“I don’t have little breasts! I’m better built than that!”

“So, what do you have then?”

“Eh?” Haruna opened her eyes wide and seemed a bit troubled before putting one hand on her hips and showing me a satisfied smile and a guts pose with her other tightly clenched fist.

“I have low-fat breasts!”

... So, I guess that’s more healthy for your body or something? But then, Haruna let out a little yelp. I followed her gaze, and saw a girl wearing a school swimsuit.

It was the cute necromancer who had turned me into a zombie. But However, she looked a bit different than usual today in that outfit.

That was pretty common. School swimsuits could be found anywhere. , Bbut, if you add in the silver hair to that, it became uncommon. And if you add in the gauntlets, it became rare!

Her form burned into my eyes more brightly than the light from a million suns.

Her silver hair fluttered in the wind, and she stood there still with no expression on her face.

Her voluminous, flowing hair spread out behind her. She didn’t have any expression, but I could see just a tinge of red in her ears and cheeks. She had small, weak arms, but they formed a stark contrast to those gauntlets she had equipped. And that school swimsuit that enveloped her innocent body was just divine! And best of all was that “Yuu” that was printed on top of those small bulges on her chest. Those just sent sparks running through my brain.

Small breasts! Go! Fight! Go! Fight!

Actually, Yuu had to use those gauntlets to seal the special powers she had, so I guess she wouldn't be able to go to a pool normally.

If there hadn't been a cosplay event going on here, I probably wouldn't have been able to witness such a sight.

Ahh, how wonderful. This was just super rare. I didn't really know what "super rare" really meant concretely, but either way, it was really valuable.

"This one's my win!"

Haruna looked really proud of herself, and she was staring right at Yuu's chest and the "Yuu" lettering printed on top of her swimsuit. Yuu continued to show no emotion, but she did form a cross with her arms overabove her bust.

Ahh, watching Yuu acting embarrassed was also the best. Sera might call me a perv right now, but I honestly don't care. Also, where was her plate armor? Was it really okay for her to not have that on?

"Hmph, you're three cups too early to try and win against me!"

Don't you mean "a hundred years too early?" Ugh, you make no sense. Also, there wasn't that much of a difference. Haruna put her hands on her hips and bent her body backwards so that her face was looking up at the sky, and began to laugh uproariously. But at that point, we heard the sound of water, and we found our gazes locked to one spot in the pool.

When I say "we" here, I meant almost every single person here at the warm-water pool.

After all, those limbs were just that incredible. They could draw anybody's attention in a heartbeat.

"Hellscythe-dono, you have come out at last. That uniform looks quite nice on you."

A vampire ninja was climbing out of the pool, with her beautiful body and wet black hair for all to see.

Both Orito and Haruna opened their mouths wide, completely dazed.

Sera brushed up her wet hair, and then bent down to pick up her towel...  
ooohhh!!

Her breasts looked way bigger than when she was in her normal clothes. No, it wasn't just her breasts... it was more the balance of her entire body.



From her collarbone to her cleavage to those lines in her waist... her lean, toned body was filled out in all the right places. She was like a work of art.

Forget fighting over little breasts and big breasts... the ones that everyone could agree on were just “beautiful breasts.” They were only uncommon in terms of rarity, but they were just as valuable as rare objects.

I’ve heard rumors that all vampire ninjas had great bodies, and but it seemed that rumor might be true.

“That’s your loss. You can’t compete with that at all.”

Orito looked at Haruna and sent her a scornful chuckle. Haruna took Orito’s torn prince outfit and straightened it once, before shouting a battle cry and ripping it left to right.

“T-Those breasts! She just tied them up!”

**Isn’t Haruna the one who did that?**

Haruna ignored Yuu’s retort. I never expected Yuu to try to retort like that, so maybe she really was a bit frustrated at losing the breast competition with Haruna?

Sera seemed to be the only one confused, and she cocked her head to the side.

“What are we talking about?”

“About how sexy your body is.”

“Ayumu, that’s sexual harassment. Go take a sextant and hara-kiri yourself.”

“What are you telling me to do with a sextant?!”

“Don’t worry! I’ll help with the execution! There won’t even be a speck of dust left!”

Haruna’s ahoge jumped excitedly back and forth, but I ignored her.

Orito took a camera out of his bag, seeming to want to memorialize this moment in film.

“By the way, Aikawa, why did you want to come to the pool all of a sudden? You missed every single swim class at school.”

“Yuu told me she wanted to go.”

I sent Yuu a kind smile. If Yuu and not Haruna asked me to take her somewhere, I'd go to the ends of the earth to make sure she got there. I was a zombie, so sunlight made me weak and faint. So I couldn't go into the school pool. But I still wanted to make Yuu's wishes come true, so I waited for a cloudy day for this. But...

**I never said such a thing.**

Huh? I double-checked the memo that Yuu had just held out. What did she mean?

"If I recall correctly, it was definitely Haruna who said she wanted to go."

Sera crossed her arms and placed her index finger on her lips. Certainly, it seemed more like Haruna to say something like this.

Wait... don't tell me... this memo was...

"Ayumu, did you know? There's a rare monster called 'Nessie' here!"

Haruna had faked the memo?! She had predicted that I wouldn't pay attention to the request if I thought it had come from her, so she made it seem like Yuu had said it! Stop being a genius in all the wrong ways!

"You pretended to be Yuu, didn't you?"

“You just noticed that? Use your head a bit more, ugh. Why would the gloomy necromancer ever say she wanted to go somewhere? Nyahaha, I’ll definitely be the one to capture Nessie!”

So, everything had been planned by this genius masou shoujo?!

“You should also think a bit more. Nessie is called Nessie because she lives in the Loch Ness. There’s no way she’s here.”

“S-She is! She’s definitely here!”

Exactly what gave her so much confidence as to be able to say that?

I was a bit pissed that I had been tricked, but I guess it was pointless to raise a fuss about it now that we were already here.

It was just too troublesome to pay too much attention to Haruna here, so I just let out a single sigh and decided to enjoy this day at the pool.



**Chapter 1: Part 3**

“Ukyaaaahhhh~~~!!!”

An ear-shattering girly scream rang through the air and got closer and closer to me.

I was helping Yuu practice her swimming kicks with a kickboard, but then I realized that I was in danger and suddenly changed course.

“.....!!”

Zabaaann~~. Really, that’s the only sound effect I know to describe this situation.

Haruna flew right towards our place in the pool looking like she was performing Southern Star Cannonball from Fist of the North Star.

Warm water rained down all around us. Yuu stood up, and together we stared at Haruna in shock.

“Stop flying right at us each and every time.”

Haruna had been jumping right at us every single time. And each time, a huge sheet of spray and the sound of her smacking into the water's surface would disrupt Yuu's swimming practice.

"Ayumu! This place is amazing! It's super fun! Nessie is definitely here!"

No, Nessie isn't... ugh. Even if there was something that looked like Nessie here, we weren't in the Loch Ness, so that wouldn't technically be Nessie. I had tried to explain this to her over and over, but...

"I wonder if I can find a Gau Ha Nessie here too~~."¹

She wouldn't listen to me at all. When everything went in one ear and out the other, how exactly was I supposed to get my message across?

Also, didn't she mean Gau Ha Leshi? Leshi, not Nessie...

Maybe Haruna thought there were multiple types of Nessie or something?

I see... just like with dogs and cats, there were many different Nessies in the world, and one of them was here at the... wait, why am I even humoring her here?!

---

¹ Reference to Heavy Metal L-Gaim, a mecha anime.

“M-Maybe that thing is Nessie?”

Haruna asked that in a stupidly loud voice, but when I looked at her it became reaaaaally clear to me why. She was just having way too much fun. Were there no pools back in the world she came from?

“That’s a water slide. You just slid down it, didn’t you?”

“Hmm... if I don’t do it again I can’t be sure. Ayumu! Let’s go together!”

Haruna cocked her head to the side before wrapping her arm around mine. You... you already know that thing isn’t Nessie, don’t you?

Haruna gripped onto me like a koala, and I began to relax into her grip, but... suddenly, I felt something soft press firmly into my arm, and I pulled my arm from her grasp.

“Go by yourself. I’m busy.”

Seriously, I was a bit surprised. To think that her breasts could feel so much more substantial by just tying them up a bit...

“Ugh, why...? Okay, gloomy necromancer, let’s go!”



Haruna pouted, but I just waved her off like some stray dog. Stop trying to get Yuu involved in your weird adventures.

“Just go by *yourself*.”

I put emphasis on the “yourself” part of that sentence, which just caused Haruna to stick her tongue out at us and dash for the water slide. Ugh, she’s such a kid...

Yuu looked up at me. She still didn’t have any expression on her face, but I could see her fists clenched tight on her kickboard.

The Yuu inside of my head was saying this: *Are you going to leave me with Haruna?*

Of course, Yuu never showed any emotion, so I really couldn’t tell what she was feeling, but I sensed some loneliness in those blue eyes of hers as she looked up at me.

Also, I personally would rather spend some quiet time with Yuu than go off and be led around by Haruna.

“So, shall we continue? Looks like you’ve gotten the hang of going straight, so I think you’ll be able to swim soon.”



I placed my hand on top of Yuu's silver-haired head and nodded. I focused all my attention on Yuu, trying to ignore the residual warmth that Haruna had left in my arms.

Yuu stretched her arms straight on the kickboard and began to kick her feet. It was a rare sight to see her trying this hard, so I just found the entire scene really cute.

Yeah, she really should try to move a bit more. I knew she was trying hard, but if she made her movements a bit more dynamic, I'm sure she would be able to swim soon.

As I listened to the sound of Yuu's high socks kicking the water, I felt my gaze begin to wander.

At the poolside, Sera was wearing a maid outfit and was getting bathed in attention. Maybe she was satisfied after swimming a lap around the pool, but she was now enjoying the cosplay portion of this event. Sera sure did like her cosplay... she was always quick to just flood me with abuse whenever she saw me in my masou shoujo cosplay though...

Orito was risking his life trying to capture Sera's image on film by putting his single-lens reflex camera to good use and taking her photos from many different angles.



Sera didn't look too happy with that, and at some point it seemed she had reached the limit of her patience. She went over to Orito and smacked him across the face. Without a single word too... geez, that was harsh. It would've been better if she called him a piece of unburnable trash or the hair on a caterpillar or something.

And of course, as Orito was falling into the deepest pits of despair, he came over to Yuu and me.

"Orito, you have to ask before you take a picture."

"I did. I asked if I could take just one picture..."

"Oh, hmm... and what did Sera say?"

"Well, Sera-san gave me this look like a person who had just trampled the single remaining flower in a big field..."

"No thanks?"

"Is what she said."

What kind of face was she making when she said that? Did she look like she was making fun of him, or maybe like she was having fun herself?

“Anyways, I’d give you ten to zero odds that this was your fault... hey, stop crying, dammit.”

“But, Aikawa. Just look at that beautiful maid over there! I could just die happy today.”

Orito’s eyes sparkled from behind his glasses. Well, it might actually have been his tears sparkling, but either way, it was gross.

Yuu stopped kicking her feet (maybe she was tired?) and came out of the pool. She then took her gauntleted hand and smacked Orito across the cheek. Wow, he was just getting completely kicked around today... although, I guess instead of kicked, it was slapped.

Orito didn’t seem to understand why he had just gotten slapped again, but I explained it to him.

“Yuu is offended by anyone who takes death lightly.”

Yuu gave a firm nod at my words and sat down at the poolside, soaking only her legs in the water. She looked almost like a mermaid in a school swimsuit, who also happened to be a fairy necromancer goddess.

There was power contained in Yuu's words. So, she couldn't let out a single sound. But that's also why Yuu understood more than anybody how heavy words could be.

"Ah, I see. Sorry about that."

"Well, if you're taking pictures, I'll have to ask you for a couple copies later."

I wanted those as well... pictures of Sera. Orito pointed the Camera at Yuu and brought his elbows tight against his sides.

"... Can I snap just one picture?"

Orito raised his index finger and Yuu gave a single nod. Orito then snapped a photo of Yuu in her swimsuit like his life depended on it.

... I'll have to ask for a copy of that later too.

**Chapter 1: Part 4**

Haruna's quest to find Nessie soon entered its climax.

"Ah, is that thing Nessie!" She bought two hot dogs on sticks.

"Ah, it's that, isn't it?!" She bought some vanilla ice cream.

She would arbitrarily decide that Nessie was somewhere in the stuff she bought and then bring those things to us.

It seemed like Haruna still had no idea what Nessie was, nor why she was called Nessie.

We decided to take a break for lunch, and gathered next to the flowing pool.

"Ugh, which one is it?!"

Haruna beat her hot dog sticks on the table like she was playing the drums. She licked the bit of ice cream that had been left on the side of her lips.

"You know, Nessie is a pretty rare creature, right? So why in the world would they be selling her at a concession stand?"



I stuffed my cheeks with the shrimp mayo hand roll I had bought at a convenience store before coming while I dealt with Haruna.

“Ayumu, you’re making fun of me, aren’t you?”

“Ahh, so you finally realized.”

“Idiot! Ayumu, go get kicked by van Nistelrooy or something!”

Getting kicked by a world-class soccer player like van Nistelrooy would be an honor!

Haruna’s ahoge stood up on end, a clear sign of her anger, but then she took off dashing somewhere with long strides.

“Ugh, I really never understand that girl. There’s no way Nessie is around here.”

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around, to see Yuu sitting there staring with lonely eyes at her yakisoba.

There was a mountain of red pickled ginger heaped on her yakisoba, but she didn’t touch it and instead looked up to me with her usual expressionless gaze. I was about to say something, but at that moment Haruna came leaping back with such force that I almost thought she was going to crash into the table.

“I found her! Ayumu, she’s over there! Let’s go!”

How many times has she already said that? She probably just mistook something else for Nessie again.

“Just go by yourself, ugh.”

“Don’t underestimate Nessie! She’s really huge! She’s a really rare monster!”

“But didn’t you just say that your hot dog was Nessie a few minutes ago?”

“That was... I just wanted to eat that!”

As I thought. It’s interesting how she could admit that like it was the most natural thing in the world. In other words, she said the waterslide was Nessie just because she wanted to go down it, right?

“Come on, let’s go! Hey... gloomy necromancer, you wanna come too?”

“Why are you trying so hard to get Yuu wrapped up in your schemes? Just go by yourself.”

“Ayumu, you idiot! You chicken teriyaki idiot!”

Haruna dashed off nimbly like a feline who had just locked eyes with her prey. When I saw her getting all worked up like that, it really reminded me of those pretend adventures I'd often set off on as a child. But still, she really seemed a bit more short-tempered today than usual. Was there something she really was angry about?

"Yuu, you're not going to eat your yakisoba?"

But Yuu worried me more than Haruna. She just seemed strange today.

And no, I wasn't talking about the fact that she was wearing gauntlets over her school swimsuit. Something was off about her expression.

Haruna and Yuu were stark opposites, but they did have a few things in common. They both weren't very tall, they both hated to lose, and... they were both huge gluttons.

So seeing Yuu not touch her yakisoba really was strange. And look at how much red ginger was on there too! Even the shopkeeper was pretty weirded out by it.

But, Yuu just sat there without an expression, looking like a doll. She might feel a bit responsible for Haruna's situation, but this was still strange. It almost felt like she was restless about something.

"What's wrong? It looks like something is on your mind."

*Tap tap.* Yuu tapped the table and left a memo there.

**Haruna hates me.**

That's not true... is what I wanted to say. But, I didn't really have the full confidence to say that.

"Hey, Yuu. What do you think of Haruna?"

It didn't seem like Yuu was expecting me to ask her that, so she just stiffened with her ballpoint pen still in her hand. After a bit of time...

**I am not sure how to express this feeling. But I do not want to be hated.**

"Does Yuu want to become friends with Haruna?"

**Perhaps.** At that point, Yuu looked me straight in the eyes and stopped writing.

Perhaps.; I would like to become friends with her.

There was a fiery determination burning in those clear blue eyes of hers.



“If you think that way, then I’m sure you can become friends. She might act that way, but she really just doesn’t want to be lonely.”

I gave Yuu a chuckle. But she just looked down and didn’t seem to cheer up at all.

“Is there something else on your mind?”

**If I do not have my armor, I cannot suppress the flow of my magical energy.**

And if she couldn’t suppress that, then she could change fate itself, was it? Yuu always remained expressionless also because her magical energy would move with her emotions, and she would end up changing the fates of all the people around her.

The fact that I had become a zombie... the fact that I then also met Haruna and became a masou shoujo... all that was because Yuu couldn’t suppress her magical energy.

So, Yuu could never show emotion.

But if she didn’t have her armor and was just wearing a swimsuit, then it didn’t even matter. Fate would move either way. In that case...

“Well, then you should make the best of this situation and have some fun!”

I gave Yuu a full-fledged smile.

**If I do that, the damage may spread.**

“Do not worry. We are here with you... please have faith in us.”

Sera glanced at me. Ah, Sera was probably the one who convinced Yuu to take off her armor, wasn't she? Good job. I gave Sera a thumbs up.

Sera's words seemed to finally break through Yuu's gloom, because like magic, the entire pile of yakisoba on Yuu's plate disappeared in an instant. And when I saw that Yuu was chewing something, I surmised that that pile of yakisoba had indeed teleported into her mouth.

**How wonderful.** = “That was yummy!”

Yuu wiped her mouth and nodded. She had clearly cheered up, and when I looked down at her memo, I couldn't help but change her voice into a cute version inside my head.

“Well, we're done eating, so shall we swim?”

“If you try to move too soon you'll get a stomachache.”

Yeah, that's true. Should we wait a bit then? Yuu took me by the hand and pointed while giving me a strong nod.

**That one which flows like the tides.** = "I want to relax in the flowing pool~~."

I saw that she was pointing at the flowing pool. Ah, I see. If we went into the flowing pool, we wouldn't have to exert ourselves too much.

"Ahh, right Sera. You really shouldn't get so angry over just getting your picture taken."

I stood up and relaxed as I spoke up to Sera. But she glared at me and replied, her words freezing me to the bone.

"Even if the picture was peeking up my skirt?"

"Well, you're wearing a swimsuit, at any rate."

"So, you're saying I shouldn't be embarrassed as long as it's not a picture of my underwear...?"

Ahh, she was pretty persuasive. So she was embarrassed, and that's why she didn't even say a word when she smacked Orito?

“Sorry. You’re right.”

Sorry, Orito. I can’t hope to beat Sera.

... Oh, right... where exactly was Orito anyway?

I looked all around me, but couldn’t see him anywhere. I also saw the camera he had been using a bit ago set down in the area where we had all put our belongings.

Did he go off somewhere? Knowing Orito, was he trying to pick up girls somewhere or something?

Nah, there were plenty of pretty girls here. Orito was not the type of person who would ever let a chance to eat lunch with a pretty girl get away!

So... did he actually get caught up into something bad?

Maybe Yuu taking off her armor had changed his fate in some way, and something had happened to him?

“I’m going to look for Orito for a bit. You go on ahead.”



When I saw Yuu nod back at me, I ran off after giving her a wave.

I had a bad feeling about this. Had something attacked him...?

I ran around the poolside with a serious look on my face.

But, I really couldn't find anybody who even looked like Orito. Maybe I was getting a bit too panicked and had missed him? Maybe he had gone home early?

Nothing seemed to really be out of the ordinary here, so if he had sunk to the bottom of the pool somewhere he would be impossible to find.

Finding no other option, I ended up going to the information center and submitting a lost child report.

Well, I'm sure he'll turn up all of a sudden at some point.

**Chapter 1: Part 5**

Yuu and I relaxed in the flowing pool together, lazily lying on our inner tubes while gazing up at the refreshingly cloudy sky. The sunlight was being blocked completely by the clouds, and it even looked like it might rain. But the full heat of the summer was still there.

Orito had not shown up yet. Geez, was that guy off loitering in some random place or something?

At that point, Haruna came excitedly bounding back.

“Ayumu! I’ve acquired the target!”

Haruna’s ahoge was jumping back and forth, probably meaning that she was having quite a lot of fun.

So what thing had she confused with Nessie this time? I mean, in terms of living things, the only living things around a pool like this were humans...

... Wait, don’t tell me she had locked onto a human?!

“Haruna. Nessie isn’t human. You know that, right?”

“Huh? Are you an idiot? Of course Nessie isn’t human! Let’s go!”

Good good. It seemed like she wasn’t causing trouble for other people... well, no, she probably was.

“Just go by yourself.”

“Why why why?! Ayumu, you idiot!”

Haruna ran off, her shoulders swinging hugely back and forth. Geez, that girl...

“Let’s go, gloomy necromancer!”

Hey, what are you doing?! Why are you trying to take Yuu with you?! Something was seriously weird about Haruna today. Why was she so hell bent on getting Yuu involved?

Also, seriously, Nessie wasn’t here.

Ugh... hm?

It seemed that something with a long neck just passed by me on the side...

I looked around, but I found nothing.

Maybe something was wrong with me today too? I was hallucinating...

Yeah, that had to be it. Nessie would never be in a place like this.

I strained my eyes and tried to follow the direction of motion of whatever I had seen, and I saw something huge with a long neck flowing along with the flowing pool. I rubbed my eyes and squinted.

Was that really Nessie? I watched as Nessie began to move out of view and cocked my head to the side. No, something was off here. Sure, that looked like Nessie, but... there was something that felt too “homemade” about the whole thing. It was like somebody was doing a Nessie cosplay...

Ah, yeah! That was the best way to describe it! Or rather, it looked like some kind of stuffed animal or floating toy or something...

Was Haruna trying to go for that thing? ... Wait, was Haruna trying to go for that thing?!

While I stood there completely amazed by all this, Haruna had already taken Yuu by the hand and was running by the poolside.

Crap! Haruna wasn't someone you could just stop with words alone. This was bad!

I began to try and get myself out of the pool.

"Ayumu, would you like to swim with me?"

I heard a gentle voice that tickled my ears. I saw Sera there in her nurse's outfit, smoothly taking off her captivating stockings while she whispered to me.

"Eh? Ahh... umm..."

This was once again a rare event. Sera wanted to swim with me? God must be on my side today.

There was a sense of duty burning inside me right now, telling me that I had to go and chase after Haruna.

But there was also a girl of unmatched beauty in front of me, stripping off her nurse's outfit...

"Am I not good enough for you?"



Sera spoke to me, a tinge of loneliness in her voice. I felt the flame of duty inside me get extinguished immediately.

Well, Yuu was with Haruna, so I'm sure Haruna wouldn't be able to just do whatever she wanted... yeah.

"Nah, not that. Yeah, let's swim together."

I held out my hand towards Sera, and she put her beautiful, pale hand in mine. Just by taking her hand like this, my brain cells felt like they were about to explode. She was the very definition of "enchanted"<sup>1</sup>. Even before I got turned into a zombie and was just a normal high school student, would I have any means to refuse an older woman with a nice body like this? No way.

Sera and I moved to the next pool over. I could feel glares of envy hitting me from all around just because I was walking hand-in-hand with Sera.

"Let us compete, then. If you can catch me..."

Her lips moved seductively. I was about to ask her if she was going to give me a reward or something, but she seemed to know what I was going to say and rested her index finger on my lips. She then gave me a teasing smile.

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<sup>1</sup> Enchanting is writing as "nousatsu," which if you decompose into its kanji literally means "head killing."

“Well then, here I go.”

Saying that, Sera dove into the pool. Was she trying to get my hopes up or something...?

I no longer was worried about Haruna, but instead dove into the pool right after her. Every bit of my high-schooler sexual appetite was fully on display right now.

However, I couldn't catch her at all. She was really fast in the water too... as expected from a ninja.

I glanced over at the flowing pool. I saw Haruna and Yuu working together to try and pull Nessie out from the water.

But just as they were about to succeed, Yuu's hands slipped and Nessie went right back into the pool with a splash. It didn't seem that Nessie even cared that she had been returned to the water; she just continued thrashing about like she was drowning. Was she alright over there...?

I watched them with a baffled look on my face, when Sera came back over to me.

“Is something the matter?”

“Ah, nah, it's just Haruna-“

“So I suppose I really am not good enough for you.”

Sera was acting strange. Why was she being so cute right now? Was she plotting something? I found it really hard to think when looking at her voluptuous limbs, but I was a zombie so it seemed all the brain cells that were exploding were also regenerating.

“Yeah, I think I have to head over to where Yuu is.”

“I see. Well, I will go for another swim.”

Sera looked a bit lonely. But when turned her back on me, I noticed that her swimsuit straps were in a dangerous situation. One of the little butterfly knots that were tying her swimsuit up was already completely loose. Just a little bit, and her entire swimsuit top would come off.

This was sending up a bad red flag.

I mean, say her swimsuit comes loose and floats gently down from her body. Of course, everyone in here would immediately stare. And if that happened... there would be enough blood to paint the entire Aegis Sea red.

And when you saw a flag with so much potential for tragedy, you had to go and squash that flag.

“Sera, wait just a second.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Just don’t move.”

If I told her that her swimsuit was about to come off, then she’d probably get embarrassed. I had to be a gentleman here and fix her strap without saying anything.

You might not expect it, but I had a lot of confidence in the dexterity of my fingers. I’ll show you I can fix up a butterfly knot in a single second. As long as nothing awful happens, I’ll be able to patch this situation and Sera will be none for the wiser.

But the minute I grabbed onto the string, I heard something.

“I got her! I got her!”

When I looked in Haruna’s direction, I saw that she was thrusting her fist high into the air.

I could only stare at her with my mouth wide open.

Nyahahaha. Haruna laughed loudly as she put Nessie into a headlock.

But I really didn't care.

There were other pressing concerns here...

"This is a striped Nessie. She comes from Ohio!"

Wait, why the hell would something from Ohio be all the way over here?

Wait, no. Seriously, I didn't care at all.

Right now, I was more interested in the face that was now exposed where this striped Nessie's long neck was.

That face belonged to my classmate, Orito. I thought Orito had disappeared, so why was he wearing a stuffed Nessie costume and hanging out in the flowing pool?

Was he just trying to make Haruna happy?

Nah, that couldn't be. When I saw him wriggling like that in Haruna's headlock, I could tell that he wasn't happy about being caught.



“Ayumu, are you done yet?”

Hey, Sera! Don’t move so suddenly! The strap nearly just came off!

Wait, just wait a second! Ugh, I’ll be done soon! Come on, me! Hurry up!

“Sera, I’ll be done in a second!”

Maybe it was because there were way too many things going through my head, but I was taking way longer with this than I had expected.

Wait wait wait wait, don’t panic. Calm down. Right! Maybe I should take a leaf out of Ikkyuu-san’s book and roll my fingers around a bit on my head. *Plop, plop, ding!*<sup>2</sup>

*Flutter, flutter.*

Why... did I let go of the strap?

At that point, Stan Hansen’s entrance theme, *Sunrise*, began to play in my head. It was the song you heard often on variety shows when he barged in.

---

<sup>2</sup> A reference to an anime about a Zen Buddhist monk. The sound effects correspond to what happens when the titular character does the motions that Ayumu are describing.



The bikini consisting of only bra cups and string was now floating lazily on top of the water.

“Wait, Sera! This was...” *Cough cough cough!*

In the next second, my head was sinking far beneath the water’s surface. I tried to crawl my way back up, but an immense force stomped me back down, and despite my struggles I sank right to the bottom of the pool. And the minute I thought I was floating up again, I was just stomped back down.

“You’re about as useful as a bent staple! Please squirm like a moth and then go die like a cicada!”

As I felt my head continue to be ground against the pool floor, I... ahh, oxygen please...

**Chapter 1: Part 6**

Sunlight was streaming down between the clouds. It seemed that I had lost consciousness.

I tried to move my body, but... hm? I couldn't move at all.

All I could see was the water's surface. This was... I guess I was right next to the flowing pool?

I blinked a few times and shook my head back and forth. I thought hard, trying to understand my current situation.

It felt like something was draped over my entire head. My head felt strangely heavy... like my face was stuck through one of those holes in those photo-opportunity cutouts at amusement parks. My body was restrained, and I felt humid and hot.

"As expected, you're quick to wake up."

I heard a voice and desperately moved my restrained head in search for the speaker. It was then I saw a bikini-clad Sera looking down at me.

"What's the meaning of this?"

“Have you not figured it out?”

I looked towards where Sera was pointing, and felt goosebumps on my flesh at what I saw in the distance. I saw Nessie strung up upside down with rope by her tailfin, almost like she was the biggest catch in a tuna-fishing competition. That was... Orito?!

“Sera, what’s the meaning of this?!”

“Ayumu, do you remember what Hellscythe-dono said earlier?”

Sera looked quite refreshed.

“What are you talking about?”

“She said you could rule the world if you acquired the Hidden Dragon or the Young Phoenix.”

We were talking about that back when we had nabe. What of it?

“In other words, Haruna believed that Nessie was the Hidden Dragon.”



Nessie, the dragon hidden beneath the lake... I see. In other words, Haruna heard she could rule the world if she had that so she was desperately searching for it...

“Look look!”

She was desperately searching for it...

“Hiiyah!!”

Wait, she was just playing, wasn't she?! She threw a beach ball at Orito, causing him to just swing around like a pendulum.

“How did Orito get like tha- Sera, this was your doing, wasn't it?!”

“Yes. That guy is more useless than the Decelerate spell from Dragon Quest, and he was acting in a disreputable way, so I decided to make him into a living sacrifice. Ayumu, you will share his fate.”

So it was like that?! In other words... I was wearing a stuffed Nessie costume right now?! And I was just going to get thrown into the pool and become Haruna's prey... and she had probably asked me to swim with her just so I wouldn't realize she was the one who turned Orito into Nessie!

“I see. I think I more or less understand things. But, there’s one thing that still isn’t clear.”

“What is it?”

“Why are you helping Haruna look for Nessie?”

Sera let out a deep, resigned sigh.

“Do you not understand just by watching Haruna?”

Haruna? I looked closely at Orito, who had now been turned into Nessie. Haruna was acting as high-handed as always, tossing him around like a sandbag.

“I have no idea. What are you trying to say? ... Hey, sto-”

Sera remained silent but just released me into the flowing pool.

I slowly got carried around by the current. Every time the water swayed, I felt my heavy head starting to sink.

“Ah, it’s another Nessie!”

And then, Haruna discovered me. Uwahh... what's up with those sparkles in her eyes?

“Look look, gloomy necromancer! It's a blue Nessie! This one mainly eats plankton, and her favorite food is okonomiyaki!<sup>1</sup> Let's pull her up!”

Nessie sure has a really bizarre diet! I felt my head being dragged, and the Nessie costume bit into my jaw.

“Haruna, it's me. Stop it and save me.”

“Hueh? Ayumu, what are you doing?”

The minute Haruna figured out it was me in the costume, she soon gave me a teasing smile, almost as if she was happy about this. It seemed she had no intention of helping me.

“That's what I want to know. Yuu, help me out here.”

Yuu was about to save Orito from his upside-down state. She unfastened the zipper behind the costume, and found a tied-up Orito inside. She began to untie the ropes.

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<sup>1</sup> Kind of like a Japanese pizza, grilled tableside.

Dammit! It looked like I'd have to wait a bit more before help arrived.

When I had been pulled up from the pool to around chest height, Haruna figured out that Yuu was trying to help Orito.

"Agh! What are you doing to my Nessie?!"

*Splash!* I slipped back into the pool, and began to cough at the sudden influx of water into my mouth.

"Haruna, you... why... why are you so obsessed with Nessie?"

"... I mean, the gloomy necromancer wanted to find one!"

Haruna didn't want to find Nessie for herself, but for Yuu?

"You did it for Yuu? Really?"

Haruna began to mumble, almost as if she had something in her mouth.

"I... wanted to come here to play..."

As I thought. She was just acting spoiled.

“You could’ve just said that in the first place.”

Although, if Haruna said that it’s not like I would have taken her here.

“No way! I couldn’t... say I wanted to come here to play with the gloomy necromancer...”

I doubted my ears a bit when she said that. Haruna had wanted to come here to play. But that was because she had wanted to play with Yuu. That’s why she was so stubbornly trying to get Yuu to join her.

Considering Haruna always called Yuu a gloomy necromancer, I had always thought that Haruna didn’t like Yuu, but it seemed like that wasn’t the case.

When I chased her off too, she acted like a brat not because she was angry at me, but because she couldn’t say that she wanted to play with Yuu.

I see... Sera decided to help Haruna in her Nessie hunt when she saw how Haruna was behaving. She had also invited me to swim not because she didn’t want me to figure out what had happened to Orito, but she wanted to give Haruna and Yuu a bit of time alone to play.

“So, that’s why you wanted to catch a Nessie?”

“If Nessie is here, then it gives us a good excuse to play together, right?”

I can’t really applaud them for *the way* they were playing though.

“You should’ve just asked her to her face.”

“N-No way! If she turned me down... then that would mean it’s my loss.”

“Don’t worry. Yuu also wants to play with you, I think. If you don’t want to ask her to play because you’re embarrassed or something, then just make up something. It doesn’t have to be rare monster hunting. And just ask her to do it with you. You say that all the time to me, don’t you? And anyways... just help me out of this thing.”

Haruna gave me a halfhearted nod. This girl also could be cute occasionally.

“Funnyaahhhh!!” Haruna desperately tried to get me out of the water, but she didn’t seem to be able to do it very well. But then Yuu (who had finished rescuing Orito) came over, and they both pulled me out together, until finally the entire upper half of my body managed to make it up above the pool rim.

“Yuu, aren’t you happy? Haruna said she wants to become friends with you.”



I wanted to alleviate Yuu's worries as fast as possible, so I said that, but then I heard the sound of something shattering from Haruna's head. Her face flushed a deep vermillion and she began to shout.

"The gloomy necromancer is just my underling! A henchman! There's no way I'd want to be friends with her! Only zombies want to be friends with someone like her!"

Why was she trying to bluff this late in the game? I really hope Yuu didn't take her words seriously.

Stop glaring at each other. Hey... come on, don't let me go!

Come on, look at me! I'm... I'm falling!

And thus, the rare monster known as the Water Corpse Zombie was born.

**Chapter 1: Part 7**

My flashback ended, and I nostalgically thought back to what had happened in the summer. But the people around me did not look as happy. Our presiding judge, Haruna, had a serious look on her face, while the jurywoman Yuu was staring at the screen with no expression on her face. The prosecutor, Sera, stood up, her ponytail swishing from side to side behind her, before fixing me with a sharp stare.

“Like that, due to the actions of the accused, Aikwa Ayumu, I was stripped of my swimsuit in public view. Even before that, it is the undeniable truth that there have been countless occasions when he looked at me in perverted ways. Judge, we request the death penalty.”

“Yeah, death penalty sounds about right.” A single bespectacled juryman crossed his arms and nodded arrogantly.

“Stop jumping to conclusions! Also, Orito, you shouldn’t be talking!”

**The accused will be reminded that he has the right to remain silent.**

“Are you forcing me to?”

“So, does anybody have an argument against this evidence?”

Judge Haruna said that, and Tomonori stood up. Sera sat back in her seat, and just watched Tomonori with cold eyes.

“I’m sure Aikawa didn’t do it cuz he wanted to!”

“I see. In other words, you admit that he’s indeed done these things?”

Sera gave the courtroom a victorious smirk.

“Well, you got me there.”

Tomonori scratched her cheek. She was useless. This damn lawyer... she was getting completely run over.

“The defense lawyer gave up!”

“Yuki-chan, that was fast!”

Two jurors began to raise a fuss. They were classmates of mine and Tomonori’s, and also members of the basketball team: Anderson-kun and Mihara Kanami.

“W-Well, sure he’s done all these things... but Aikawa is a good guy! Let me give you some proof of that!”

Tomonori had an eager look on her face as she began her counterattack, but things were already rolling downhill here.

“You’re already trying to argue sentence reduction and extenuating circumstances? It’s a bit early for that!”

Anderson-kun, looking like an English gentleman, echoed my feelings on my behalf.

“Eh, but... he clearly sexually harassed her.”

“Yuki-chan should be saying that it was an accident, right~~?”

Mihara shook her head in resignation. Tomonori clapped her hands, as if just realizing that she had that option.

“Ah, yeah! It was an accident!”

“Was it an accident? The accused, you may answer!”

*Bang bang.* Haruna pointed her hammer at me.

“It was an accident. I was desperately trying to fix her strap.”

“Liar.” The juror who said that was clearly a perverted guy. Just by looking at his pervy spiky hair and his pervy glasses, you could tell. His name was Orito. Orito something something or whatever.

The prosecutor once again fixed me with a sharp stare.

“Well, fine. Let’s say it was an accident... why didn’t you warn me at all?”

“Because you’re damn scary. Also, I thought it’d be better for you too if I fixed it without you noticing.”

“But, you’re clearly grabbing onto her strap.”

Mihara followed up with that comment. A picture of me holding onto Sera’s swimsuit straps was being shown on screen.

“As I said, I was trying to fix it-“

The prosecutor raised her hand at that moment, as if trying to prevent me from finishing my sentence.

“I would like to pose a question to our male jurors. Would you try to grab a swimsuit strap if it was about to come off? Or would you warn the girl?”

"I'd warn her," said Anderson-kun.

"I'd get excited," said Orito.

*Bang bang.* Haruna gave the courtroom a smile, as if signaling that she had reached a decision.

"Sold for two thousand yen!"

So cheap! She probably just had wanted to say that all along, didn't she? Acting like an auctioneer...

Tomonori seemed at a complete loss for words. I also couldn't say anything here. But then...

"I... I think... I wouldn't be able to warn her... either..."

I had felt like I was playing at an away game and was surrounded by enemies on all side, but then appeared a goddess descended down to earth to save me.

It was another one of my classmates, who had been called here as a juror and who was sporting her usual two pigtails: Hiramatsu Taeko.



**I would also be unable to warn her.** = “It’s not just oniichan! Yuu wouldn’t be able to do it either, hmph!”

“Yeah, see?! I declare presumption of innocence! I incest that the defendant did not intend to do evil!”

Uhh... who’s incesting who again? It seemed that she was so preoccupied with remembering the legal vocab (presumption of innocence) she had just learned that she had forgotten the word “insist.”<sup>1</sup>

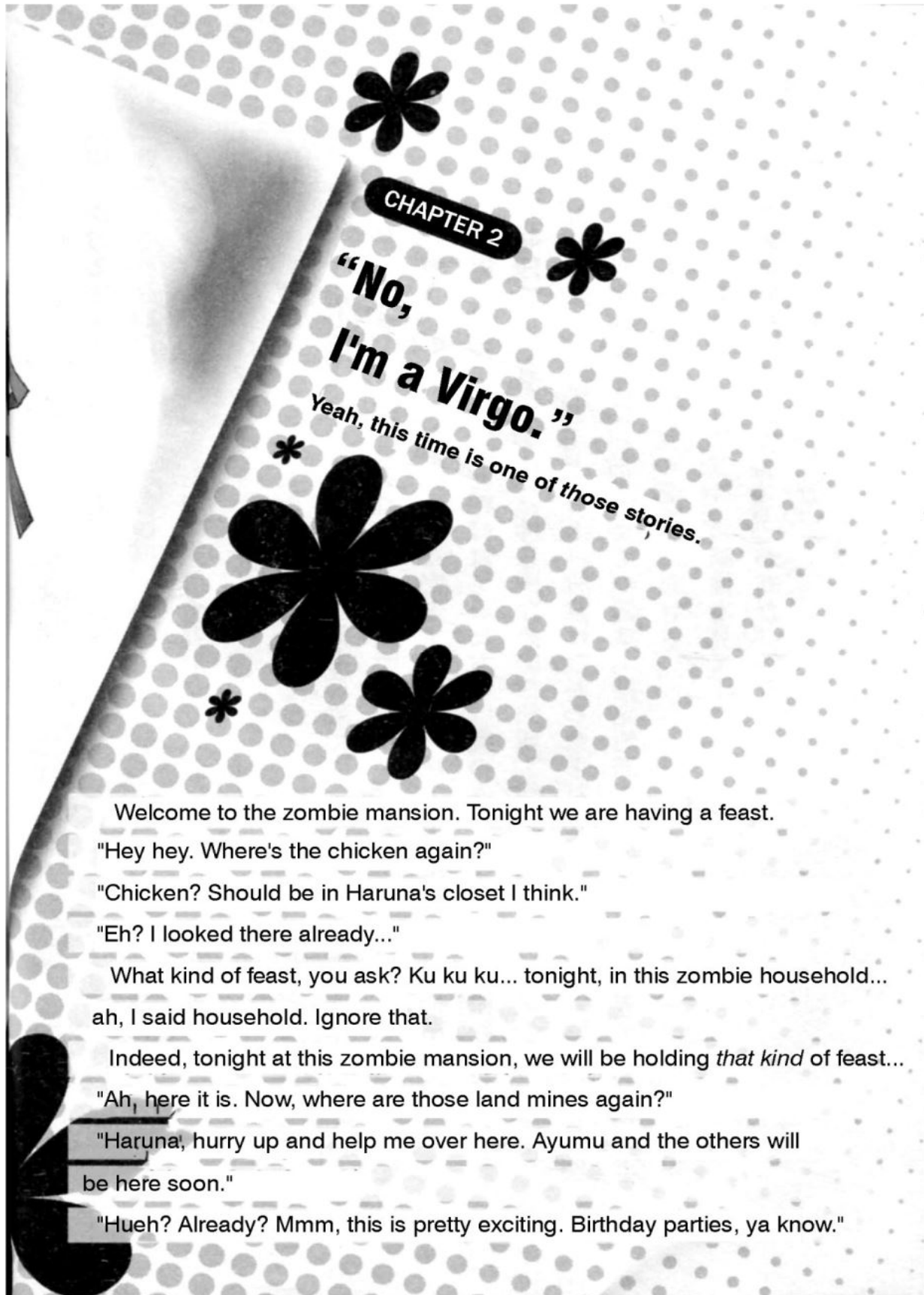
“Well, okay then. Let’s move onto the next recording.”

Sera’s eyes were clear: it seemed that this trial had just begun.

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<sup>1</sup> Okay okay, admittedly the pun was not on the word “incest.” In the original Japanese it was “shichou” (to trial listen to something) versus “shuchou” (to insist).





Welcome to the zombie mansion. Tonight we are having a feast.

"Hey hey. Where's the chicken again?"

"Chicken? Should be in Haruna's closet I think."

"Eh? I looked there already..."

What kind of feast, you ask? Ku ku ku... tonight, in this zombie household...  
ah, I said household. Ignore that.

Indeed, tonight at this zombie mansion, we will be holding *that kind* of feast...

"Ah, here it is. Now, where are those land mines again?"

"Haruna, hurry up and help me over here. Ayumu and the others will  
be here soon."

"Hueh? Already? Mmm, this is pretty exciting. Birthday parties, ya know."

## Chapter 2 – No, I’m a Virgo<sup>1</sup>

### Chapter 2: Part 1

There are a few things in life that just can’t be avoided.

Being born, dying, studying, having to split a set of wooden chopsticks, getting your fingerprint on clear tape, getting a yellow cover on your elementary school bookbag<sup>2</sup>, stepping on a thumbtack, getting foot sores, etc. etc.

Well, all of those things I listed seem to be bad things...

“Ayumu, what did you prepare?”

Sera’s black ponytail swished from side to side as she turned around to face me and immediately whispered that question to me.

Why was she whispering? I was a bit astonished.

It was midway through September, around the time when the summer heat was finally starting to subside.

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<sup>1</sup> Just to note, but the constellation Virgo is also known as the Virgin, and in Japanese is literally written as “the Maiden Constellation.”

<sup>2</sup> Apparently it’s for traffic, kinda like how in the West they put stop signs on school buses.

Well, no... the heat was still there, but it was probably that Sera's pretty jade-colored eyes were piercing me right through me and chilling my bones.

Or maybe I just had a low body temperature in the first place. I was a zombie, after all.

"Ayumu, are you listening?"

She didn't seem too happy with the astonished look on my face, and her stare leveled up in coldness, now feeling like daggers digging into my skull.

"Ah, sorry Sera. What were we talking about again?"

Sera glanced to her side. A single girl was sitting there drinking out of a teacup.

She was sitting in the middle of the room indoors, but she still always wore plate armor and a clumsy-looking set of gauntlets. However, this girl Yuu may be clad in what looked like a set of armor from the Middle Ages, but she was so cute that it made you shiver. A pleasant smell came from her long, silver hair, making me want to just bury my face into it.

Yuu didn't seem to pay us any mind, but Sera looked at her again, her own nice-smelling ponytail swinging around. She faced me and beckoned to me while standing up, almost as if she wares challenging me.

It seemed that she wanted to move to a place where we could talk alone.

After Sera left the living room, I puzzled a bit over whether I should follow her, but eventually curiosity got the best of me and I also stood up.

Maybe something pervy was awaiting me in the other room...

As I exited out into the hallway with a goofy grin on my face, I saw Sera waiting for me there and giving me a glare.

Indeed, it seemed like something pervy was *not* waiting for me.

Trying to avoid her sharp glare, I dropped my gaze to look at those marshmallowy fluffy breasts resting on top of her crossed arms. It had been around three months since I had met Sera. And in that time, I had already developed a technique that allowed me to enjoy the sight of Sera's breasts without her noticing.

She was glaring at me, so of course I had to look away. I really had no choice, okay?

She was a vampire ninja, and she loved to cook. If I didn't make sure to keep a close eye on her, she would end up trying to cook something for us.



But really... those breasts... they weren't too big, but they definitely had a sense of presence. Pretty amazing...

I had the privilege of living with these beautiful breasts every day, so of course I had to look at them.

"You have a disgusting look on your face. Is something wrong?"

"Ah, nothing. Don't worry about it."

I tried to look serious again so she wouldn't realize I was looking at her in a dirty way.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Is there anything you can do about that disgusting face of yours?"

Well, I was honestly trying to put on the most handsomest expression ever here, but whatever.

"You called me out here just so you could tell me that?"

Sera lightly opened her mouth and let out a sigh.

“Are you aware that Hellsythe-dono’s birthday is tomorrow?”

“Eh? Really? No, this is the first time I’m hearing about that.”

“I imagined that was the case, judging by your behavior...”

Sera shook her head resignedly and curled up her thin, long index finger, placing it on her rose-colored lips.

“Tomorrow, huh? I’ll have to get her a present. So what did you prepare?”

“An accessory. Well, it doesn’t matter what you prepare... I’m sure she’ll be the happiest with my gift.”

Sera looked down at me with an arrogant smile on her face. Overconfident, wasn’t she?

“May I take that as a declaration of war?”

“Yes... well, it’s not like you have much of a chance though.”

“Challenge accepted, then.”

I guess the prize here was a compliment from Yuu. To me and Sera, there was no more valuable prize in the world.

“In any case, I wanted to talk to you about tomorrow. I would like to hold a surprise party for Hellscythe-dono, so would you be able to take her away somewhere for me?”

“Ahh, sure. So you want to do something like that. Are you going to invite Orito and Tomonori?”

“I should. Let’s make it a grand party.”

“I heard everything!”

Suddenly, I heard a loud shout behind me.

The voice behind me sounded really happy, and it gave me an ominous feeling...

When I turned around, I saw Haruna standing smack dab in the middle of the stairs, also crossing her arms like Sera and giving us a proud look. She probably hadn’t come down all the stairs so she could look a bit taller.

“I see. Tomorrow is the gloomy necromancer’s birthday.”

Fu fu fu fu. She let out a suspicious chuckle. Anybody could tell that she was planning something as her cat-like round eyes narrowed.

Her huge, cat-like eyes sparkled mischievously. I had a bad feeling about this... in fact, this gave me nothing but bad feelings. She was probably thinking of doing something strange again, wasn't she...?

Anyways, the best thing to do here was to not indulge her. Sera also seemed to agree with me.

"Anyways, thanks and good luck."

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it too."

"Hey, you two! Stop ignoring me!"

**Chapter 2: Part 2**

It was the next day: Yuu's birthday. I was a zombie, so I couldn't walk around freely under the sunlight, which meant, as usual, I spent the day at school chatting idly with people until the sun set.

The sun was setting outside. My classmate Orito was sitting in front of me, while Tomonori, a classmate from next door who had come over just to chat, sat to my side.

"So, well... there's a birthday party today. Can you two come?"

"Eh? I can go?"

My super super ordinary classmate Orito played with his unnecessarily spiky hair and his eyes began to water up behind those glasses of his. Hey, it's just a party... don't start crying just because of that, dammit.

"M-Me too?"

The short-haired girl wearing a sailor's uniform put her index finger on the bridge of her nose. Her name was Tomonori. Well, you technically were supposed to pronounce it "Yuki," but she was so tomboyish and unrestrained that people called her "Tomonori" as a nickname. She was also a vampire ninja, just like Sera.

“Yeah, both of you can come.”

“I want to go, but I...” Tomonori looked a bit torn about something.

Tomonori might be a vampire ninja like Sera, but they belonged to opposing factions.

Also, because of a ridiculous accident, for some reason Tomonori was now my “wife.” Despite that though, she always was considerate of Sera’s feelings and never intruded at our home.

“Sera is okay with it, so it’s fine.”

“Can I reaaaaaally go?”

“How many times are you going to ask that?”

“Okay, I have to prepare a gift then. This is all pretty sudden...”

Tomonori crossed her arms and shook her head, groaning.

“It was pretty sudden for me too. I had to rush out yesterday and buy something for Yuu.”



Tomonori and I shared a laugh, while Orito stood off to the side, his eyes sparkling. He began to speak in a low voice.

“I had thought a day like this would come... so I always already have a present ready.”

“Good for you. So, what kinds of things does Eucliwood Hellscythe seem to like? Does she have any hobbies?”

It seemed that Tomonori intended to just ignore Orito. He would just get more annoying if we paid attention to him, so I agreed with this move.

“I don’t think she has any hobbies... she just usually sits in the living room and drinks tea.”

“Tea, huh...?”

Orito seemed to be aiming for this lull in the conversation.

“I’ve already-“

“Ah, maybe she’d like some kind of food?”

Agh! I was actually going to listen to Orito there, but Tomonori completely interrupted him!

“I’m sure she’ll be happy no matter what. It’s the thought that counts.”

“I-” Orito’s eyes were tearing up in sadness behind his glasses, so I let out a sigh.

“Orito, what did you want to say?”

“A-Aikawa! Listen to me! Tomonori is bullying me!”

I *was* listening to you. I got it, so stop crying.

“She’s a beast! She’s a complete beast!”

Stop grabbing my clothes, dammit. Also, stop looking at me with those big eyes like you’re a maiden in distress or something... oh and also...

“Just hurry up and spit it out already!”

**Chapter 2: Part 3**

Now then, as Sera and Haruna made preparations for the birthday party, I took Yuu with me and was having fun shopping with her.

I would've liked to have researched what Yuu wanted and bought her something here, but there was going to be a surprise party later, so I decided it was best to not bring up the fact that it was her birthday. Also, I had definitely gotten something for her already. Something that I'm sure Yuu would enjoy.

"What do you want to eat today?"

I asked that question almost like we were husband and wife as I stared at the mountains of vegetables in front of me. Yuu tore off a memo from her memo pad and showed it to me.

**I want nabe today.** = "Yuu wants to eat nabe!"

Nabe, huh? Nabe on a birthday was a bit... and we also had cake for later... but she might get suspicious if I were to say no here, so maybe I should first ask her what kind of nabe she wants.

"What kind of nabe?"

**Dark Nabe of the Seven Hells<sup>1</sup>**

What kind of nabe was that?! Also, it really was a bit weird to eat nabe before cake... wait. Tomonori and Orito were coming too, right? Okay, so it might be correct to do something that everyone could participate in. Alright, let me at least try to make this a nabe a bit more special.

“Let’s do shabu shabu then.”

**Wonderful.**

Cabbage, shiitake mushrooms, konnyaku noodles... rustling sounds filled the air as Yuu and I threw anything we could get our hands on into our basket.

We shopped around until it was nine at night. We just wandered around and around the supermarket, wondering if we should make the shabu shabu Korean-style, or maybe we should make it into oden instead.

**When it becomes this time of year, I always think something.**

As I picked out the cheap, strange things I was going to feed to Orito, I heard Yuu speak up to me.

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<sup>1</sup> Dark Nabe is a style of nabe where people sit in the dark and just toss whatever they want into the pot (in anime, these things are not always edible).

“Something poetic about autumn or something?”

**I wonder if I really should’ve been born.**

Her memo stopped me cold. Yuu still didn’t have any expression on her face, but I could’ve sworn she looked a bit lonely. Trying to hide my shock, I began to move my hands again and answered her with a smile.

“Of course you should’ve. Why are you thinking about something like that?”

**Today is my birthday.**

Her words once again stopped me cold. I had no idea whether I should just continue to feign ignorance here while hiding my shock...

“I-It is? I didn’t know at all. So it was today... congratulations.”

**Congratulations?**

“Ah, I mean...” I tried to push down my shock and took a deep breath.

“Happy birthday.”

I let a full smile show on my face and put a hand on Yuu's sparkling silver hair.

That was close. It seemed that my acting abilities had kept me safe though.

**I do not feel happy at all.**

Her pretty blue eyes looked up at me.

Yuu had the power to change fate. If she was happy or sad, if she showed just a bit of emotion, then bad things would happen to the people around her. That's probably what she was saying.

Up until now, I had already died once and was forced to deal with troublesome people like Haruna and Sera.

But, Yuu, I had also met you, hadn't I?

Those words came to me, but I thought they were way too clichéd and ended up keeping them to myself.



**Chapter 2: Part 4**

We ended up buying mountains of ingredients, and soon found ourselves standing outside my front door.

There was something up there on the roof. The autumn sun had set, and I could tell under the moonlight that the thing on the roof was a huge chicken. The chicken was leaning forwards and had its wings spread out, so it looked like a spiritual embodiment of those chickens that decorated the front of Rolls Royce cars.

There was also a sign hanging from the chicken's neck.

**wellcom to hous of skares.**

That was written on the sign with dirty-looking lettering. The plate itself was lopsided, and the letters were dripping almost as if someone had used an excessive amount of paint. It was an incredibly low-quality looking sign.

... Whee... surprise, I guess...

**You're not going in?**

"Well, I really, *really* do want to go in, but..."

Yuu walked forwards, her body swaying from side to side.

Ugh, why did Sera go through all this trouble? I followed Yuu up to the front door.

Looking closely, I noticed that there was something flat lying right behind the sign on the chicken.

That was... a guillotine blade?

There was a rope or something connected to the guillotine blade, and following that rope, I could see that it was being held by the front door.

In other words, opening the front door would send the guillotine blade crashing down.

What the hell, a booby trap?!

Yuu didn't seem to notice this and just opened the door. The taut rope suddenly relaxed and the guillotine blade began to fall with a hiss.

"Yuu, watch out!"

Yuu looked up, still no expression on her face. That assassin's blade was already boring down on her.

*Clang!* Her gauntleted hands clapped smartly around the guillotine blade.

T-The legendary blade-catching technique?!

Ohhh, that was pretty cool. Yuu didn't really move around that much, so I guess it was fitting that she would know a skill like that.

Yuu took her hands off the blade, and it began to shoot up into the air.

That rope... was it made of rubber?

The guillotine blade bungee jumped back up, but this time began to come down right on my head.

Hyah! I tried to do a little legendary blade-catching of my own... but I was too slow and the blade stuck right into my forehead. I held my forehead, completely regretting that I had not just evaded the damn thing, before extracting the blade and setting it softly against the house so it wouldn't do any more harm.

Geez... what was this supposed to accomplish? This didn't feel like a celebration at all. Why was Sera... wait. Was Sera really the kind of person to do something like this? I mean, she would probably do it to me, but definitely not towards Yuu. That girl tended to worship Yuu, after all.

In other words, this was Haruna's doing, wasn't it? That's really the only thing that made sense here.

But well, even for her, this was a bit... *click*.

Click? What? I heard a sound I'd expect after switching the bathroom lights on, and then something under my feet exploded.

A landmine?! Look at what you've done to my pants... so, when Yuu was waving from side to side, she was just trying to avoid the landmines?

It was all fine and good because I was a zombie, but what if Yuu actually stepped on one of those? Also, Orito and Tomonori were both coming later, weren't they?

Which meant... I had to step on all of them!

I tap-danced across the pathway, stepping on each and every land mine buried there. Giant booms echoed through the air, which I had a sneaking suspicion might bother the neighbors. At the same time, the hems of my jeans burned to a crisp. I tried my very best to minimize the damage to my clothes as I finally reached the front door and opened it.

I saw Yuu standing ahead of me. But she was just standing there. She hadn't even taken off her shoes.

This time, I was the one who spoke up first.

“You’re not going in?”

**We have entered into a magically warped space. If we are careless, we may never be able to return.**

Whee... surprise...

An unfamiliar hallway stretched out seemingly infinitely in front of me. I couldn’t see the kitchen or the living room or the bathroom anywhere. All I saw was a rectangular space continuing endlessly before me.

Don’t just go off and magically warp my house, dammit.

“How did the house turn into this mess...?”

**I do not know.**

“Fuhahahaha! Welcome to the haunted house!”

Haruna’s bratty voice echoed all around us. It was like we were in the middle of a 360 degree surround sound system.

“I’ll be your lovely director on this day, the worst day of your year. Be grateful!”

“Haruna, what in the world are you thinking here?”

“...”

No response, huh...?

“What happened to Sera?”

“...”

“... Haruna, I can see your underwear.”

“Eh? Seriously?!”

“That was a lie. But you can definitely hear me, can’t you?”

“Aren’t you a clever one?! You Eroward D. Morrison!”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to Tales of Phantasia character.

What exactly was running through her head?

“So, where’s Sera?”

“...”

That little bastard... I could see a mental picture of her arrogantly turning her back to me right now.

“Ah.” Haruna seemed to have struck on an idea, and continued in an incredibly mischievous tone.

“What if I told you... that leaf woman is in the kitchen?”

It sounded like Haruna had just come up with the idea on the spot, so it was probably a bluff, but...

..... It was certainly a possibility.

Okay, let’s hurry. You could say that there was no easier way of getting yourself cooked than eating Sera’s cooking...

And I would sooner die than let food like that get served on Yuu’s birthday.



“Well well, seems like our moth is flying right into the flame! And bringing some green onions with him too!”

Haruna said that as if she had been waiting hours for the right moment to let that little gem loose. Well, it was true I was carrying green onions though.

“Yuu, just wait here.”

Yuu’s head moved slightly to the side and then went back into its original position. She didn’t show any emotion, but I knew exactly what that gesture of hers meant.

“I want to go with oniichan! If I’m with oniichan, I can face anything that comes our way! So let’s go together, ‘kay?”

That’s how the little Yuu inside my head translated her head movements. Ahh, she sure is cute, isn’t she?

I took Yuu’s pale, gauntleted hand in my own.

“Don’t let go, okay?”

Yuu’s jaw budged just slightly downwards in a little nod.

We took our first intrepid step into the hallway, when...

“Ahh, you can leave all the stuff you’re carrying over there.”

Haruna’s voice completely cut through the beginning of this dramatic adventure scene. I scratched my head and left the veggies I had brought in the entranceway. We set off again.

A magically warped space, huh...? Did Haruna really have the power to do such strange things like this? The hallway was around three meters tall and just as wide. I couldn’t see the end of this hallway... and I could swear it was sloping up a bit.

I found myself staring down that hallway...

*Rumble rumble rumble rumble...*

That sound didn’t really make me happy... but it just kept getting louder and louder, and eventually I could see something black coming at us with great force. I soon confirmed it was a huge iron ball hurtling towards us, the ball just as wide and tall as the hallway.

... Well, I guess having a huge iron ball roll towards you was a pretty standard thing in a place like this.

So now there was an iron ball in front of us and the doorway behind us. But even if I wanted to escape outside, the door wouldn't open.

It felt like we had already reached the climax of this little action thriller, even though we hadn't taken more than a step into the hallway.

Yuu used her gauntleted hands to point forwards. I followed her fingers and saw a slightly caved-in portion of the square wall. So I guess there was a place we could go to escape from danger.

So Yuu wanted us to jump into that hole there? Wait... the damn iron ball was pretty much already rolling past it!

"Let's hurry!"

I gripped Yuu's hand and ran towards the iron ball.

Just a bit more... but the iron ball was faster.

We're not going to make it! But Yuu thrust herself in front of me.

**Do not mind me. Ayumu, save yourself.**

Yuu then took me by the arm and judo threw me over her shoulder. Yuu, you... are you telling me to go by myself into the hiding spot? What a saint you are! What a-

“Hnghaahh!”

The iron ball had already rolled past the hiding spot and hit me fiercely from behind. My body curved as the ball rolled over me, sticking me right to it. I doubt even Robin Hood’s bow was this curved.

And, that immensely strong collision with my body was enough to completely stop this three-meter diameter iron ball traveling at 40 kilometers an hour.

I weakly stood up, wobbling all the way, and pushed the iron ball back.

**Sorry.**

“Don’t worry about it. You were just trying to help.”

We rolled this giant ball back together, and using the hiding spot properly this time we were able to squeeze our way by it.

But, now our way back was completely blocked off.



We had no choice but to push forwards, so that's what we did. I was expecting to find more weird traps along the way, so I kept my eyes and ears open.

"Yuu, you should be careful too--"

But when I turned back, I saw Yuu was holding out her hand to me.

**Your hand.**

"You want to hold hands?"

I can't believe she would ask to do such a cute thing with me...

Ah, and she nodded! She definitely nodded! My god she was cute!

"Okay then. Shall we proceed?"

I gingerly touched her fingertips like she was some kind of princess... and it was precisely at that moment.

*Krchhh*. I heard an unfamiliar sound and saw a pair of panels open in the floor.

Yuu's beautiful silver hair fluttered in the air.

It was a trapdoor! A trapdoor had appeared just under Yuu's feet. The trapdoor itself wasn't very large, which meant I was outside of its range.

I gripped Yuu by her clumsy-looking gauntlets. That was way too close.

"I'm going to pull you up now, okay?"

This type of stuff happened quite a lot to me, but for a zombie like me this was no sweat. Pulling up one person would be like scooping up a goldfish.

*Drdrdrdrdrd.*

What... was this ominous sound? It was almost like there was a rive-

Before I could even turn around I felt a huge amount of water slam into me from behind. After hearing what I heard, I was already expecting this to happen, but I had underestimated the pure force of the water. I began to lean forwards, and was treated to a full view of the inside of the trapdoor.

The water rushed into the hole in the ground.



Wow, what a deep hole that was. I couldn't see the bottom at all. I was gripping hard onto Yuu's now-wet gauntlets, but those things were getting pretty slippery.

I couldn't really brace my legs very well, probably because I was grabbing onto Yuu with both hands, and I felt my body sliding towards the trapdoor.

**Let go. You will fall in too.**

The memo Yuu showed me soon became swallowed up in the flood and disappeared into the hole.

*Whoosh. Whoosh.* The water rushed past me and continued to fall into the hole. All my muscles began to tremble.

I gripped tightly onto Yuu's hand, almost as if giving her a handshake.

"Yuu, did you really think I'd let go? Don't underestimate me. I'm three times as much of a perv as you think! I'm here touching a girl's slippery slidey skin, so I'll never let go!"

In the middle of my little act, my body was thrown cleanly into the hole.

**Idiot.**

“I didn’t fall in, okay? I was just holdingtouching your hands and then I just suddenly wanted to hug you close.”

I pulled Yuu to me and hugged her tight as well fell further and further.

**Pervert.**

So, what was going to happen now? I shut my eyes and thought back to when I was thrown in, when I felt something collide with my back. Huh? I thought this was supposed to be a bottomless pit.

*Gatagatagata!* I felt myself sliding down a flight of stairs headfirst. Wait... stairs?

When I opened my eyes, I found myself back in my own home.

What happened to the magically warped space? What happened to Yuu? Ah, Yuu was still there right in my arms... thank God.

**It seems that the hole was the correct way out.**

I see. So even if I had managed to pull Yuu up back there, we would’ve never gotten out moving forwards.

**Why did you fall in?**

Her beautiful, blue eyes looked up at me. Yuu's silver hair and my clothes were all soaking wet, but neither the stairs nor the hallway here was wet at all.

"I just wanted to be with you, obviously. Hey, Yuu... back there, what gave you the idea that you shouldn't have been born?"

**I bring misfortune to everyone.**

"All the misfortune that happened right now was Haruna's fault. So, are you trying to say that Haruna shouldn't have been born either?"

Yuu shook her head, her wet silver hair swaying behind her.

"Nobody can avoid misfortune. Life is filled with painful experiences, so almost everyone at some point will want to die."

**I think so too.**

"In that case... birthdays are truly happy occasions. After all, you've fulfilled your responsibility to live on another year."

Yuu's expression was as doll-like and emotionless as ever, but she gripped my hand tightly and nodded.

At that point, I saw Haruna coming down waving a bath towel around, looking extremely satisfied with herself, almost as if she had just succeeded in some epic quest or something.

“How'd you like that?! The Three Great Traps of Harunaland! Pretty crazy, right?!”

Alrighty. Time to dole out some punishment.

**Chapter 2: Part 5**

After I paid Haruna back with a sharp blow, her ahoge was now protruding out of a lump atop her head. She was now sitting on her knees in the entranceway, tears welling up in her eyes.

“So, what in the world gave you the idea of doing this?”

“The gloomy necromancer... I heard it was her birthday...”

Haruna looked apologetic for her actions, but I still spoke to her strongly like a parent scolding his child. Yuu was standing by, drying her shining silver hair with the bath towel.

“So you were playing mean pranks on her out of jealousy?”

“Hueh? No, not at all! I was doing this for the gloomy necromancer...”

“So you reduced my jeans to a wet, holey mess for Yuu’s sake? Also, didn’t you say something about making this the worst day of her life or something?”

“That’s what a birthday is for!”

“Exactly what the hell do you think a birthday is?!”

“Birthdays are days where you celebrate your life until that day.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“The masou shoujo are always risking their lives fighting the Megalo. So, for us, it’s really lucky to be able to survive for a year. You could say our fortune is at its highest at that point! But then, the only direction your luck can go is down... so... the masou shoujo tradition is to try and force your luck down on your birthday.”

“What an obnoxious tradition... I guess I should expect no less from the masou shoujo.”

Well, I guess if she was trying to help Yuu celebrate her birthday in her own way, then I can’t blame her too strongly for that...

As usual, Haruna went around doing things that made it hard to tell if she liked Yuu or not...

“So, don’t you have something you’d like to say to Yuu?”

“Sorry.”

After seeing Haruna so teary-eyed down there on the floor, I really didn't feel like scolding her further. But just as I was trying to figure out what to do next, the doorbell rang. Good timing.

Before I could even answer the bell, the door shamelessly flew open and a smiling bespectacled guy came into the house.

"Yo! Here I am!"

Orito was carrying some huge package as he came in, and I also saw Tomonori silently standing next to him, wearing a pretty girly chiffon one-piece dress.

"Hey there. Welcome."

"Aikawa... why do you look like that?"

I swear, Tomonori looked almost like a girl in that dress. Anyways, she asked me that question while glancing at my tattered jeans.

"Also, what's up with that thing on your roof? Looks like a Rolls Royce hood ornament or something."



Orito pointed his thumb out the door, still carrying that big package. It seemed that even if the magically warped space had disappeared, the lawn decorations were still there.

“If that’s all that you found strange outside, that’s honestly a relief to hear. Anyways, the answer to all your questions is simple. ‘You don’t want to know.’”

Haruna jumped up just as the two new arrivals came in.

She probably didn’t want anybody else seeing her kneeling on the ground and getting scolded like that. She put both hands on her hips and gave them her usual bratty smile, acting like nothing had happened.

“It’s like lying under a table and having a red bean mochi fall into your mouth!”<sup>1</sup>

“Aren’t you combining two idioms there...?”

“Hueh? Okay, it’s like a gold coin falls on you while you’re sleeping.”

“I think that’s also a combination of two idioms...”

---

<sup>1</sup> A Japanese idiom meaning “unexpected good fortune.” The issue is that usually you either say “red bean mochi fall into your mouth” or “red bean mochi fall from the table.” You don’t combine the two.

**No, that one exists.**

... Really? Okay then. I scratched my head a bit and turned my eyes away from Haruna. Haruna looked up at me with a scowl and narrowed eyes.

“You doubted me, didn’t you? Apologize!”

“Haruna-sama, I humbly apologize from the depths of my heart.”

Well, it seemed that the whole gang was here now, so we headed for the living room. We opened the door, and...

*Bang!* An uncountable number of party crackers went off. It seemed that opening the living room door would trigger all the crackers at once. It was like the guillotine trap that Haruna had set on the front door.

A ponytailed beauty stood inside the living room, clapping and welcoming Yuu in.

Both Orito and I clutched at our chests when we saw the warmest smile Sera had ever given. A smile from a pretty girl was like a biological weapon... how exactly could these smiles be so damn powerful?

But, that’s a relief. Sera was in the living room, not the kitchen.

“Congratulations!” I imitated Sera and began to clap.

“Congratz~~” Tomonori gave Yuu a pearly-white smile and clapped.

“Yuu-chan, congratulations.” Orito looked at Yuu, wanting some applause himself, but she ignored him.

Haruna was looking the other way entirely, but I saw she was bringing her fingertips quietly together.

“Sera, looks like Yuu wants to have nabe for dinner. I bought some meat for shabu shabu, so could you start getting things ready? I... have to go change out of these clothes.”

“Shabu shabu...? We have a cake though...”

“Yuu said she wants to eat it, so that’s enough, right?”

“That’s... true.”

“What’s shabu shabu?”

Haruna cocked her head slightly to the side. Orito went up to her with a disgusting-looking smirk and whispered something into her ear.

Haruna's face flushed bright red...

"You trying to get me to take off my panties?!"<sup>2</sup>

Haruna rushed over to me and dealt me a fierce kick in the knees. Goddammit Orito, stop teaching her things she really doesn't have to know!

---

<sup>2</sup> Kinda strangely, no-panties shabu-shabu restaurants exist in Japan. You get served by waitresses who are not wearing undergarments.

**Chapter 2: Part 6**

I changed into dry clothes and returned to the living room, where I saw that the nabe preparations were already underway.

The portable stove was already lit, but the water had not boiled yet.

“Okay! Time for presents!”

Orito raised his hand with enough force that he almost pulled himself to his feet.

“Yay!” Tomonori also raised both her hands up in jubilation.

“Presents?”

Haruna never really had much interest in the customs of this world, so she distanced herself from Orito and Tomonori while her ahoge wriggled in suspicion.

“In this world, you give the birthday person presents to celebrate their being born into this world.”

“Hueh? T-That’s... no way...!”

Haruna looked like she had just been struck by lightning. She suddenly pointed at herself and spoke frantically.

“M-Me too! I’m gonna celebrate my birthday next year too! Be sure you bring presents!”

This girl... the minute she realized she could get presents...

“Aghhhhhh!!”

Tomonori yelled out, her body slightly bent forwards.

“I also... had a birthday... this year.”

Was it that really such a big deal that she had to yell like that?

“You’re an idiot, aren’t you?”

Orito looked down at Tomonori with cold eyes.

Sera coughed loudly, clearly unable to keep herself from butting in for any longer.

“Well then, I’ll go first... well, my present will be the best one though.”

“I don’t think I can let you get away with saying that.”

Sparks flew between me and Sera.

There really wasn’t a point in continuing to have this glaring contest with Sera, so I looked away, and Sera brought out a really fancy-looking box. She handed the box to Yuu.

**Can I open it?**

“Yes, of course.”

Yuu opened the box, and found a necklace inside. She then closed the box without any change in her expression.

Ha ha ha. Looks like Yuu didn’t really like it. Don’t go off and think that Yuu was the same as any other girl!

“Okay, my turn!”

Orito held out his huge box, which wasn’t even gift-wrapped.

The following words were dancing about on the box:

**Make all your troubles go boing boinging away! The Bust-Up Machine Boing X!**

S-So damn shady... do you really think you can make Yuu's small breasts larger with a thing like that?

Yuu took the box emotionlessly, and emotionlessly set it next to her.

That was a natural result. Don't go off and think that Yuu was the complete polar opposite of every other girl!

"Orito, you're just the worst..."

Tomonori looked seriously taken aback.

Orito twisted his neck and glared at Tomonori.

"And what exactly did *you* bring? Huuhh??"

"Tadaa~! It's that filter-looking thing you see on pressed mackerel sushi! You get a year's supply!"



“White konbu?” Haruna properly corrected her.

“Yeah, that. Thanks!”

“Eh? Is that stuff actually edible? Whenever I eat mackerel, I always take that filter-looking stuff off before eating.”

Orito mumbled while he readjusted his glasses.

“You mean white konbu?”

“Yes, that. Thanks, Haruna-chan.”

“Giving a girl white konbu for her birthday is a bit...”

Sera pierced Tomonori with her gaze, causing Tomonori to begin clattering her teeth.

Orito clutched at his chest, and even a zombie like me had to admit that gaze chilled me to the very bone.

Sera wasn’t taking the konbu seriously, but I was a bit panicked. Yuu could be kind of strange sometimes... so it’s possible the gift I had to beat was this konbu.

“Yuu, have this.”

As Sera continued lecturing Tomonori, I passed Yuu a mug. It was a cute cup, with a polka-dot pattern made up of animal paws.

I chose this pattern because it resembled the pattern on one pair of Haruna’s panties, and I remembered thinking that this pattern would suit Yuu pretty well.

“You’re always using the same teacup, right?”

Yuu took the mug and immediately started trying to pour tea into it.

“If you want to use it, let’s wash it first.”

Sera stood up and took the mug, stepping over Orito on her way to the kitchen.

Orito took the opportunity to look right up Sera’s denim shorts, causing Sera to click her tongue at him.

If I tried the same thing, she probably would’ve stuck swords in my eyes... but Sera didn’t even kick him once as she walked away.

Vampire ninjas had a law to never kill humans. So, they couldn't even act when they were being sexually harassed.

I was kinda jealous.

**Thank you everybody. Going through all this trouble for someone like me.**

Ahh, I think I'm going to take this memo as a special keepsake.

Sera came back, and we quickly poured hot tea into the mug. Yuu wrapped her hands around the mug and took a drink.

Yuu shut her eyes and continued to drink, when Sera spoke up.

"So, whose present did you like the most?"

Was there really any point in asking? Look, the only present she was *actually using* was my mug.

Yuu put the mug down on the table and picked up her ballpoint pen.

**Can I be honest?**

“Of course.”

Yuu seemed a bit at a loss, and just sat there without moving. But nNobody else said anything either, and we all just all sat there watching over her. Seeing that, Yuu leaned forwards slightly, and then...

She hoisted up the **Make all your troubles go boing boinging away! The Bust-Up Machine Boing X!** box.

It was a grand gesture, not unlike when Link hoisted up the Master Sword.

W-Wait... *that* was her favorite present? Orito won? Seriously?

“W-What about my necklace?”

Sera couldn’t hide her shock and took out the necklace she had gifted Yuu.

**I have a metal allergy.**

Even though she was always wearing armor?

“What about the mackerel filter thing I got for you?”

“You mean the white konbu?”



“Yes, that! Thanks!”

**It is like castella sponge cake. I cannot eat it.**

So she was kind of like Orito in that respect.

“So, what about my mug?”

**In the end, tea should be drunk from teacups.**

That was a very Yuu-like thing to say.

**But, I am truly happy. Thank you, everybody.**

Ahh, I just don’t care anymore. She wasn’t smiling, but when we saw that memo, nobody could care about the gift competition anymore.

And so, the shabu shabu war broke out, and smiles leaked out on both Sera and Haruna’s faces. Orito and Tomonori also entertained us with their sheer ridiculousness.

In the end, Haruna was the one who ended up using the mug.

Granted, that wasn't too surprising. She did own a pair of underwear with the same pattern after all.

"Oh, actually, there *is* something on my mind..." Orito started speaking, and everyone else fell quiet.

"What is it?" Sera glared at Orito, and he put a hand to his chest.

"How old is Yuu-chan exactly?"

"....."

"....."

"....."

The world seemed to freeze over around us at that moment.

Come to think of it... how old was Yuu anyways? Tomonori and Sera were also frozen stiff. It seemed that the vampire ninjas knew Yuu's true age.

"She's probably two years old or something."

Haruna didn't seem to be interested in the topic of discussion, and just said something random. Nah, there's no way that was right...

Tomonori glanced at Yuu's face to gauge her reaction, but of course Yuu was as expressionless as ever.

"Hellscythe-dono's age is-"

Sera couldn't finish her sentence.

"Good night."

We all heard an angelic voice coming from Yuu's mouth.

And then everybody fell asleep.



**Chapter 2: Part 7**

Ahh, I guess something like that *did* happen at some point.

“Your Honor, we would like to present a witness to this event.”

“Okay, then make it a 100% pure witness! No impurities, no additives, never from concentrate, okay?! The witness to beat all witnesses... come on out!”

After Haruna shouted something that felt more appropriate at a mixed martial arts tournament, Yuu stood up from the jury box and came over to me.

We switched spots, myself heading for where the defense lawyer was sitting. They couldn’t find a witness stand, could they? Yuu plopped herself down in the chair that was sitting in the middle of the A/V room and rested her gauntleted hands atop her knees.

Sera stood in front of Yuu.

“Now then, Hellsythe-dono. Please allow me to confirm that the defendant uttered the following words.”

*“Yuu, did you really think I’d let go? Don’t underestimate me. I’m three times as much of a perv as you think! I’m here touching a girl’s slippery, glistening skin, so I’ll never let go!”*

*“I didn’t fall in, okay? I was just holding your hands and then I just suddenly wanted to hug you close.”*

Yuu firmly nodded.

“And what did you answer in response to those words?”

**Pervert.**

“Hey, wait a sec. I didn’t really mean that... it was more like a joke or something...”

“You’re saying you lied?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“The prosecution presents this evidence to the jury, that the defendant is a pathological liar.”

“I see. Nice trick there. I don’t think he could’ve gotten out of that one no matter how he answered you.”

Anderson-kun, who was in the jury, seemed quite impressed with Sera.

“Sera-san is absolutely right!”

Orito, also seemingly a juror, crossed his arms arrogantly and shouted that out.

“Hey hey! Wait just a sec! Objection! Objeeection!”

My “lawyer” Tomonori waved her hands frantically, trying to raise an objection.

“What’s up with you now, Tomonori...?”

Tomonori was raising such a fuss that Orito seemed a bit annoyed with her.

“Anyways, you can cross-examine the witness now.”

Haruna spoke in a pretty uninterested tone. Tomonori seemed to be waiting for this moment, and energetically hopped up to the witness stand.

“Eucliwood-san. Has Aikawa done anything bad to you?”

**He has not done anything bad.**

Tomonori seemed quite pleased with herself at that answer, but Sera quickly raised a slender hand in the air.

“Objection. The defense’s question is vague, and it is difficult for us to understand exactly what she is talking about.”

“Well, ‘kay, I guess that’s a good objection. The defense will rephrase the question to be more specific!”

“Ehh, but I just want to show everyone that Aikawa’s a good guy and what happened this time was just a fluke.”

As expected of an idiot, Tomonori got completely flustered as she searched for the right words.

“Okay, continue then. Also, break the defendant’s skull.”

I get the feeling that the judge had just decided to hand down sentencing, but everyone ignored her.

“Umm... uhh...”

Tomonori didn't seem to know what to say. She was an idiot after all, so she wasn't good with words. But then...

“Are you saying that... Aikawa-kun did what he did deliberately?”

Hiramatsu, the girl with the ponytail in the jury box, asked Yuu that question with a serious look in her eyes.

**Ayumu has always given me courage. He would not do such a thing on purpose.**

Tomonori nodded fervently in agreement.

Looks like the tides of war were turning my favor. Good, good...

“So, Aikawa. Why exactly did you say something like that?”

Anderson-kun asked that question not at Yuu, but at me directly.

“Well, how should I put it... wasn't it a cool thing to say?”

It was an embarrassing joke I made back there, I admit. I'm sorry about that.

"Gross! Almost as gross as looking down at what you think is a shoelace and finding a centipede there instead! So gross!"

Mihara gave me a dirty look while her perfectly made-up face trembled, her long brown hair swinging behind her.

"Uwah, this guy is seriously lame!"

Even Orito was making fun of me...

"Indeed. Certainly, he may have given Hellscythe-dono courage, but the prosecution also strongly asserts that his disgusting nature was on full display when he said that. The prosecution has no more questions."

Sera puffed out her chest, seemingly sure of her victory.

Was this the end for me?

"Aikawa is a good guy! Why won't any of you believe me?!"

"Stop being so irritating."

“Just look at this next piece of evidence! I’ll be the witness myself!”

I could almost fool myself into believing that Tomonori seemed like a lawyer at that moment. That’s how much passion was flowing through her body right then.

But seriously, just give me a bit of a break here... is what I wished for in my head, but I knew my wishes would fall on deaf ears.







## **"Is That a Shooting Star?"**

Yeah, this time is one of those stories.

### **CHAPTER 3**

Good evening. Aikawa Ayumu here. My hobbies, you say? Hmm... well, I've been getting pretty into mountain climbing lately.

"I'm gonna definitely call him by his name today! Ayumu... Aikawa... Yuuki."

How'd that start? Well, that friend of mine who's muttering to herself over there suggested it to me.

"Who the hell is Aikawa Yuuki?! What the hell am I saying?!"

Haha, it's as you guessed. I'll be climbing up the mountain today with her.

"A-Aghhh... hngghhh... Ayumu. Ayumu. Ayuuuumuuuuu."

Ah, the train's almost here.

"Hey, Tomonori. Hurry up or you're getting left behind."

"W-Wait up, Aikawa! ... Ughhh, idiot idiot idiot! You couldn't say his name at all!"

Why am I climbing a mountain, you ask? Well, there's something there I need to see.

The starry sky, that is.

**Chapter 3 – Is That a Shooting Star?****Chapter 3: Part 1**

It was November. The air had turned cold, making me sorely long for my kotatsu.

October was the school festival and December was Christmas, but there really wasn't anything worth mentioning going on in November. It was a slump month.

Well, granted I was a zombie who loved just lazing around each day, so you could say that November was a wonderful month for me.

The after-school classrooms which were bustling with preparations for the Culture Festival in September now seemed extremely quiet and lonely in comparison.

Looking around me, I gauged that everyone else in the classroom seemed a lot less energetic than usual too...

"Aiiikawa~~! I'm here to hang out!"

Nevermind. I lied.

A single girl stood there looking like an idiot. She had short hair and huge eyes, and her slender limbs were wrapped in a sailor's uniform. She wasn't very tall, and all in all came off as a bit of a brat. Her name was Yoshida Yuki. But everyone called her...

"Hey, Tomonori." I lightly raised my hand.

"D-Don't call me Tomonori! Come on, just call me Yuki! Just once, that's all I want!"

"Ohh, Tomonori's here?"

Another classmate of mine, Orito, had come back from the convenience store and held out a plastic bag to me while stuffing his cheeks with meat buns.

He had spiky hair and wore glasses. There was absolutely nothing else worth noting about this ordinary high school student.

I was a zombie, so I tended to lose consciousness when I was exposed to sunlight. Because of that, I always ended up asking classmates to buy food for me at the convenience store and then waited for nightfall in the classroom while eating like some detective on a stakeout.

"Uwaah! Gyah! Come on!"

Tomonori lifted both her hands into the air and yelled out nonsense. It seemed she wasn't happy about being called Tomonori by Orito as well.

"What's wrong with her?"

Orito seemed rather confused as to why Tomonori was acting this way, so I offered him an explanation.

"Just call me Yuki once. Just once. That's all I ask. Come on."

"Hmm..." Orito seemed to lose interest in the conversation. He gave a final glance at Tomonori and then plopped himself down in his seat. But then, seeing Tomonori sulk, he seemed to hit on an idea and pushed his glasses mischievously up on his face.

He looked at Tomonori with a sparkling, majestic expression like the lead actor in a Takarazuka Revue show.

"... Yuki."

*Shiver...* At that moment, everyone in the classroom felt goose bumps rise on their flesh. To think that Orito could sound so disgustingly gentlemanly... my God, that was so gross.

“I love you... Yuki.”

And there’s the follow-through! Somehow, I was able to get through this without barfing, but...

“Ugyaaaaaaaaahhh!! Stahhhhhhhhhppp!!”

Tomonori was shaking her head frantically. I really didn’t blame her for not being able to bear her name getting called like that.

“So, do you want us to call you that or not? Stop being so wishy-washy.”

Orito returned to his usual idiotic facial expression and tossed the rest of his meat bun into his mouth.

“Just say it normally! Say Yuki-chan, or Yuki-san, or whatever! Just say it normally!”

“Yuki.” Orito this time called Tomonori’s name out with his cheeks stuffed with meat bun and his face making him look like the Savior of Century’s End<sup>1</sup>.

“Aghhhhhhhh!! Stop! Seriously, stop!”

---

<sup>1</sup> Fist of the North Star reference.

“Should we make some ‘I Love Yu-ki’ t-shirts too?”

“I said stop! Who would want a t-shirt like that?!”

“Judy and Mary fans, maybe.”<sup>2</sup>

“Don’t bring Judy and Mary fans into this!”

“You can write all the words in English. Something like ‘I ♥ YUI.’”

“When did ‘Yuki’ turn into ‘Yui’?! You should get on the floor right now and beg for forgiveness!”

“I’m not great at English, so I can’t really tell the difference between ‘akiko’ and ‘aiko’ or between ‘hyde’ and ‘hide.’”

“That was all just romaji! You should get on the ground and crawl around the entire world apologizing!”

I was just sitting on the side listening to their little comedy routine, but when I realized there wasn’t really an end in sight, I cut in.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lead singer’s name is “Yuki.”

“You two sure are pretty energetic today. It’s already November, you know? Maybe you should quiet down a bit...”

“November... ah, right, Aikawa! You free tomorrow?!”

Tomonori seemed to remember something and clapped her hands together.

“Tomorrow? Well, other than school, I guess I’m free.”

“Could you come somewhere with me at night?!”

Tomonori’s eyes sparkled as she shouted that at me. Orito’s glasses glistened.

“A date, you say?! Hey, Tomonori! If you want a date, go with me-“

Orito loved girls so much that to him, there was probably nothing more exciting than being able to go out with one somewhere. I guess it didn’t even matter that this was a girl who was not only a huge tomboy, but also someone he saw every day.

His little handsome-guy act was nowhere to be found anymore. Orito just looked at Tomonori with expectation in his excited eyes while he fiddled with his spiky hair.

I just ignored Orito and turned towards Tomonori.

“Night, you say... where did you want to go?”

“It’s gonna be a bit far, but there’s a place where you can reaaaaaally see the night sky! Don’t you feel your heart fluttering just thinking about the starry sky? Don’t you?”

The minute Orito heard this would be a star-gazing expedition, I could almost see the air around him turning a dull, murky brown.

“Aikawa... this is it for me, I think. I’ll leave Tomonori to you.”

Well, Orito never seemed to be the kind of person who would like stargazing, so he probably wasn’t interested in a trip like this. If this were anybody else but Tomonori, he would’ve probably jumped at the opportunity to go though.

“Wow, you did a quick 180 there. Do you really hate stargazing that much?”

“What did I do to have to go and look at stars with Tomonori?! Go yourself!”

“Hey hey, I didn’t invite Orito at all! Aikawa, seriously! I’m begging you! This is the last thing I’ll ever ask you!”



Tomonori clapped her hands together lightly, almost as if she was preparing to do some alchemy. She shut her eyes tight, and then opened them a crack to gauge my reaction.

“Ahh, okay okay. A stargazing trip every once in a while isn’t a bad idea.”

“Ohh! Cool! Thanks so much, Aikawa!”

Tomonori really looked like a cute girl right then and there.

Yes, she looked like an innocent girl who had fallen in love with an older boy, and who had just received a favorable response to her brave confession. She seemed happy but a bit self-conscious.

... That’s exactly how she looked right now.

**Chapter 3: Part 2**

That's exactly how Tomonori had looked, but right now she was scowling at me, like someone who had just chugged a liter of soy sauce.

After we had promised to go stargazing together, I found myself at the station waiting for Tomonori at around five in the evening. When Tomonori arrived, her face fell into that scowl before anybody had a chance to say anything.

"Why... why isn't Aikawa alone?!"

"Huh? You got some kinda complaint about me?"

Tomonori was near tears when she saw a short girl in front of her. The girl's eyes were huge and catlike, and her ahoge would have put an anglerfish to shame. This was the small-breasted, idiot Haruna, who looked just as bratty and overly confident as ever. When I had told her I was going stargazing with Tomonori, she decided to tag along as well.

"Maybe I really shouldn't have let her come..."

"Nah, it's fine I guess. But let's at least go and change into more proper clothes..."

Tomonori drooped her shoulders. Now that she mentioned it, I saw that even though Tomonori had made this sound like a fun trip, she was wearing pretty heavy clothes... eh? Were we going to go climb a mountain or something? Don't tell me... this was going to be the real deal kind of stargazing?

I glanced at my side. The November air was pretty chilly, but she was wearing a short skirt. Her black high-socks came up to her thighs, but they really wouldn't protect her very well from the cold either.

I was also just wearing a parker over a shirt. It was an outfit that would be more suited for a shopping trip in the city.

"Anyways! Yukinori wants to go somewhere, right? Come on, take us there!"

Haruna was a master at forgetting people's names, so she called Tomonori Yukinori. And Tomonori called Haruna master.

The two of them knew each other as cooking companions. But Haruna was the master, and Tomonori was like her disciple.

Haruna gave Tomonori a cocky smile. Was she supposed to be the daughter of a military general or something?

"Master... you really should change out of those-"

Haruna completely ignored Tomonori's advice and went into the station. Seeing Tomonori's mood dropping, I put my head comfortingly on her head.

"Sorry about this. The minute I told her I was going to look at stars with you she said she wanted to go too."

"Aikawa... what about you?"

"Hm?"

"Aikawa... do you want to go see the stars?"

"Yeah... they're pretty amazing, right?"

"Yeah! Super amazing!"

Tomonori flashed me a pearly white smile, her expression shining brighter than the summer sun.

**Chapter 3: Part 3**

After we spent a bit over an hour on the train and around two hours walking, we soon found ourselves on the outskirts of Kanagawa.

We had been walking up a mountain road that was probably steeper than 15 degrees. From the train window, it didn't seem like there was much height to the mountain, so the steepness of this path was pretty surprising.

There were quite a few varieties of trees lining this mountain road. There were broad-leaf trees which were already shedding faded leaves onto the ground, as well as pine trees which seemed as healthy as ever despite the autumn chill. Those latter trees had probably been implanted into the existing forest in a reforestation effort.

There wasn't a vending machine in sight, let alone any street lamps. The road was dark, and we pushed forwards.

This might've been the perfect place to hold a test of courage.

But... I was a zombie, Tomonori was a vampire ninja and so was used to the darkness, and Haruna was a masou shoujo monster exterminator. Nobody here was scared of the dark, and it was simple for us to move around without a flashlight.

However, we also had caught sight of a “Beware of Bears” sign on the way up here.

So, maybe this really was a test of courage.

“Agh! It’s so cold! When are we getting there?!”

Exactly how many times has Haruna said that up until now? She had been complaining the entire way up here while sticking close behind me.

Well, I was only wearing a parker too, and the temperature up here was lower than I had expected, so...

“Cold cold cold cold!”

But she was really annoying. It’s not like complaining was going to make anything better.

It seemed that Tomonori felt the same way because at that point she turned around with a frown on her face and lifted both hands into the air.

“Ugh! If it’s cold you should just go back!”

It was pretty rare to see Tomonori getting annoyed at somebody.

Maybe that was why Haruna widened her eyes and stopped her grumbling.

Seeing that, Tomonori looked down at the ground, looking a bit guilty.

“Um, uhh... sorry. We’ll be there soon.”

There was now a bit of an awkwardness floating through the air now. Haruna also began to fidget.

“Ah, I need to use the toilet.”

“There’s no toilets around here, though...”

Tomonori seemed at a bit of a loss, but I continued in her place.

“What about using those bushes over there?”

The mountain path we were walking on right now was fully lined with trees, and the branches and foliage all around us formed a natural tunnel. A carpet of dried leaves was spread out at our feet, and beyond the trees were a bunch of fluffy bushes which looked like big moss balls. Haruna could probably go over there and not worry about being spied on.

“I’ll go there then... I know Ayumu is a perv, so you better not peak! You better not, okay?!”

Why in the world would I want to do that...? Ugh.

And so, Tomonori and I were left alone looking up at the sky, but the space above us was so cluttered with branches from the cedar trees around us that we couldn’t really see many stars. Drying cedar leaves hung off the branches, looking like they would fall to the ground at any moment. Even if it started raining, we probably wouldn’t get very wet here... and in the spring this place must turn into a hay fever nightmare. Around five minutes passed as these kinds of thoughts ran through my head, but Haruna had still not returned.

“She’s taking a while.”

“... Maybe she went way into the forest?”

Into that dark forest... it’d be fine if there was another path in there, but if there wasn’t there was a possibility she got completely lost. I saw Tomonori’s worried expression and scratched my head. Maybe we should go and look for her?



“That idiot... Tomonori, I’m going to go look for her.”

“O-Okay! I’ll go too!”

And so, we ended up going into the dark forest.

We stepped over a few big fallen trees and continued forwards.

The same sights passed us again and again. It felt like we had gotten ourselves into a very complex maze as we went further and further in.

What the hell... how deep into this place had that idiot gotten? I started to really worry that we had already passed each other.

“H-Hey, Aikawa.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

I couldn’t see her very well in the dark, but I could tell that Tomonori was blushing a bit.

“I was just thinking... we finally got a moment alone...”

“What’s with you all of a sudden? That’s a pretty weird thing to say.”

“C-Can’t I think something like that? I’m Aikawa’s bride, after all.”

Bride. I stopped walking when I heard that word. Tomonori and I had become husband and wife by some random law of the vampire ninjas... but I really wished she would stop with that. Zombies weren’t really reliable enough creatures to be able to shoulder a heavy responsibility like that.

“What kind of reason is that? Also, do wives usually call their husbands by their last names?”

In other words, if Tomonori was still calling me by my last name, then she also hadn’t fully recognized me as her husband yet. That’s the implication I was trying to make, but...

“Eh? ... Ah... hmm...”

Tomonori’s eyes widened, and she seemed quite happy, almost as if a good chance had just fallen into her lap.

“You’re acting kinda strange today.”

“Can I... use your name?”

“Hm?”

“Can I call you by your first name?!”

“Ahh. Sure.”

“A-Ai...” Tomonori shook her head quickly from side to side and then tried to continue, her earlobes flushed a bright red.

“Ayu-“

“Gyaaaaaahh!!!”

A girl’s shriek ripped through our eardrums. That was definitely Haruna’s voice roaring into the center of the forest.

I heard the frantic sound of grass being pushed aside coming closer and closer.

And then... we saw Haruna galloping towards us, chased by a huge swarm of bees.

“Oh my God... you can’t be serious...”

“Uwaaaahhh!”

Tomonori and I both turned tail and broke into a panicked run.

We could probably do something about a bear, but bees were a bit...

“Hey! Ayumu! Stop running away!”

Haruna chased us, all the while spouting nonsense.

And, as it turns out, the reason Haruna-sama did not want me to run was...

“Ultimate Technique! Ayumu Barrier!”

She wanted to use me as a shield.

Haruna grabbed my clothes and forced me behind her, facing the bees.

Gyaahhhh! T-The damn bees! Having left me behind as a decoy, Haruna quickly sprinted off alone. I began to swat at the bees which now surrounded me from all directions.

“Aikawa! You okay?!”

“Yeah, no problem.”

I turned around and saw Tomonori right in front of me. The path here was narrower than the mountain path, so I knew she was close to me, but I didn’t know she was *that* close. My head bumped into hers. Tomonori’s feet slipped after the impact, and we both fell to the ground together.

“Ow ow ow...” Tomonori’s face was warped in pain. She soon gave me a smile though. Maybe she just didn’t want me to worry... but her smile grew more and more stiff.

Well, I guess to a bystander, it would’ve looked like I had pushed Tomonori to the ground and was going to try something funny. So it’s natural she would be scared.

“A-Aikawa...”

Her voice trembled. I turned my head around, still lying atop Tomonori. And I saw...

It was a bear.

It was a two-meter tall bear, brushing a huge, centuries-old tree branch over his head like some apologetic salaryman who had just brushed up the entrance curtain at a bar late at night, wondering if he could still get a drink.

W-We actually met a bear! A furry bear! A furry, fluffy bear!

Should we play dead? This is where we should play dead, right? Even though I was already technically dead!

I leapt up to my feet, and also helped Tomonori up while keeping a wary eye on the bear.

Don't panic... yeah, you're a zombie. You're even more of a monster than that bear!

Calm down... okay. I could feel my heartbeat settling back to normal. But the bear reached out to my chest with a paw, seeming to want to check my heartbeat for himself.

*Rip.* His sharp claws ripped through my shirt! This bastard... I'll beat him down and put him to sleep.

I took one step forwards, but I felt something cling to me from behind.

"I-I-I-I-It's a bear! Aikawa! It's a bear! A bear!"

"C-Calm down, Tomonori! You're supposed to be stronger than a bear, aren't you?!"

Tomonori hung all her weight on me, almost making me think that it's been her lifelong dream to be a rucksack. Her arms covered my face, while some awfully soft things pushed into the back of my head... I guess you could call this a side perk. Tomonori had a reputation for having bigger breasts than she let on, after all.

"Hey, stop! I can't see!"

*Pop!* I heard a strange sound next. A button on my jeans had flown off, probably also clawed off by the bear.

"It's a bear! We're getting beared! Beared!"

"If you have enough time to yell stuff like that, you should just get off!"

I heard an ominous growling coming from where the bear was, so I clicked my tongue and broke out into a run with Tomonori on my back.

Fortunately, I knew exactly where I was going.

"Ugyaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

See? There it was. If we just followed the sounds of Haruna's screams, we'll eventually be able to meet up with her. For now, we just needed to find a place where we could calm down.

*Bzz, Tsst!* No, that wasn't the sound of electricity. As if this situation weren't bad enough, the trees around us almost seemed to be cursed as their branches caught on my clothes and ripped them even more.

Ah, I knew what was going on now!

This damn mountain was totally going after my clothes!

If I could only see in front of me, I'd be able to avoid the tree branches. I could try to just shake Tomonori off, but those soft globes pushing onto the back of my head were so comfortable that I lost my willpower to do so.

It seemed my full-speed zombie sprint paid off since I soon couldn't feel any hint of the bear around anymore. I don't think bears had the ability to hide themselves this well, so we had probably successfully gotten away.

"Uwaaaaaahhh! A bear. A beaaaaaaaaarrrr! This is bad! I'm allergic to cats!"

"We're fine now! Calm down, Tomonori! Also, what does a cat allergy have to do with anything?!"



“Eh? O-Ohh... okay...”

I thought I would finally get her off me, but at that point we lost our balance. I tried to save it by taking a step forwards, but I ended up stepping on a branch, getting caught by a fallen tree, and then tumbling to the ground.

I naturally reached out for something in front of me to steady myself, but I still had a bit too much momentum left from my sprint and ended up kissing the earth. The feeling of dirt and grass on my face was really unpleasant.

*Schllp...* Well then, what could that sound have been? I lifted my head up a bit to check, and I saw a pretty girl there with her baggy mountain-climbing trousers half down.



Her long hair was tied up into a ponytail, her breasts were beautifully well-proportioned, and her limbs were almost frustratingly soft and slender. She looked down at me like she was staring at some dirty thing, or like she was a school teacher annoyed by one of her naughty students.

But within her pretty eyes was the unmistakable sign of a demon.

Her jade-colored eyes bled crimson after I had pulled down her trousers. After I was granted an audience with her pre-eminent light-blue panties, Sera pulled her pants back up and sighed.

“Ayumu... I assume there is a good reason to this unfortunate turn of events.”

“Ahh, of course. Sera... there’s a reaaaaaally good reason for this...”

“If there isn’t... I will kill you. Okay?”

I stood up and brushed off the dirt that had stuck to my clothes before explaining everything as simply as possible to Sera.

“I was attacked by a bear and tripped. The situation was completely out of my control.”

“In other words, to prevent yourself from falling, you ended up grabbing my pants and accidentally started to strip them off. You are telling me that something you’d only expect to happen in manga was happening right here?”

“Yes, exactly. That’s exactly what happened.”

Sera seemed to find my explanation a bit funny because she stuck her fingers in both of my eyes. If I weren’t a zombie, that would’ve blinded me, you know...

“Seraphim... why are you here?”

Tomonori seemed to have regained her composure, but was getting flustered again at seeing Sera there. She looked like she had seen a ghost.

“I came here to watch the stars with Hellsythe-dono. There is a good spot up ahead.”

I see. Sera was a vampire ninja like Tomonori, so it’s believable she’d know about the same stargazing spot.

“That’s...”

Tomonori drooped her shoulders. She really has been acting strange today...

“Has our presence inconvenienced you in some way?”

There was another girl next to Sera. She was the same height of Haruna, and possessed shining silver hair, snow-like skin, and blue eyes. The name of this cute girl was Eucliwood Hellscythe.

For certain reasons, this girl couldn't talk, but instead kept completely expressionless as she held out a memo.

**I am sorry.**

I couldn't see very well in the dark, but it seemed like something like that was written on the memo.

*Sigh.* Tomonori let out a deep sigh.

"If you are unhappy for any reason, I can cut the tallest person here to ribbons as a diversion."

"Tallest person... you mean me?! Why are we talking about cutting me now?!"

"More importantly, Ayumu, why are you all here?"

"I'm here to look at the stars with Tomono-... ah, Sera, have you seen Haruna around?"

“No. Was Haruna with you as well?”

“Yeah. She was being chased by a swarm of bees and she should’ve come this way.”

Sera took one quick glance at Tomonori and shut her sharp eyes. She let out a sigh.

“I understand. We will go look for her.”

Tomonori seemed to brighten up at Sera’s words.

“Hm? Shouldn’t we go look for her together?”

Tomonori seemed to darken back down at my words.

Did she want to save Haruna or not? Make up your mind, ugh.

“You’re as oblivious as always, aren’t you?”

Sera said that in a suggestive tone. I guess I am oblivious... care to tell me what I’m missing here please?

“By the way, there is a strange, sweet smell in the air, is there not?”

“Why are you looking at me?”

I sniffed at my torn parker sleeve, and sure enough there was a strangely nice smell there... ah! Haruna must've stuck something on there!

That little brat... in either case, I wouldn't be able to yell at her without finding her first.

Like that, we formed the Haruna Search Party.

We lined up in a row and walked along the narrow mountain road while screaming Haruna's name. My clothes were already more than half torn to shreds and the cold was starting to get to me, but when I asked Sera to lend me some clothes she poked my eyes out (again), so for now all I could do was pray that we found Haruna quickly.

I felt something lightly pulling on my parker sleeve. I then felt my parker sleeve coming off, turning it into a no-sleeve parker on one side.

Ahh... this thing had been really damaged, hadn't it?

I realized that Yuu had been the one who had grabbed onto my sleeve.

**Up ahead**

She showed me a memo with that written on it.

Squinting my eyes in the darkness, I saw that the path widened up into a larger area up ahead. I broke into a dash.

Yuu chased after me, followed by Sera and Tomonori.

We broke into a circular clearing with the grass mowed down. It almost looked like one of those strange crop circles you sometimes saw on TV.

The artificially planted pine trees were nowhere to be found, and the clearing was surrounded by fallen leaves which were painted the orange colors of autumn. It was really a nice place to experience autumn. I took in a deep breath, and smelled something nice in the air. But that could've just been my imagination.

And in the middle of that big clearing, so big that an entire tennis court could've easily fit inside... there was a bear.

**Up ahead there is a bear.**

Yuu had caught up to me, and thrust that memo at me. Maybe it had been too dark, but it seemed I hadn't read her memo back there to the end. I was puzzling over whether we should run, but then I realized that the bear, who was sitting flatly on the ground, was holding onto something.



It was a short girl with a prominent ahoge. It was Haruna.

What exactly was that girl doing?

“Haruna...”

I wasn't really scared of just a bear, so I just approached them straight on. I heard Haruna say something in a soft, wheedling voice.

“Mmmm... so waaarmm...”

Well, it's wonderful she was warm then.

“Using a bear in place of a sofa... seems quite like something Haruna would do.”

Sera had also come into the center of the clearing, and was now smiling with her arms crossed.

**I want to cuddle with it too.**

Yuu was here too, and although she was expressionless, I could feel she was a bit jealous.

We all stood around the bear, exchanging smiles.



“Why?!”

Except for Tomonori, who was still standing at the entrance of the clearing. Her shout broke right through the rustling of the dry leaves around us.

“Why, each and every time... there’s always so many people butting in?!”

There was a hint of tears in her trembling voice. Nobody spoke up in response.

“I just wanted... just wanted to go look at the stars alone with Aikawa! Why are Seraphim and all the others always with Aikawa?!”

I see... she had wanted to come on this trip alone with me, and I hadn’t picked up on that and ended up bringing Haruna with me... usually this is the point I would try to talk my way out of things, but right now I couldn’t figure out anything smart to say. All I could do was stare at Tomonori as she clenched her fists.

I really had to say something. That was the only thought circling through my head right now.

“Don’t get the wrong idea!”

I heard a voice coming from the bear’s midsection, before his big arms were moved to the side and Haruna came bounding out.

“Eh?”

“The way you put it makes it seem like we all like Ayumu!”

Haruna snapped her slender index finger to point at Tomonori.

“Yes, that is quite an irritating assumption.”

Sera turned towards Tomonori and narrowed her eyes.

“But... you all came here! You just wanted to interrupt me and Aikawa, didn’t you?!”

“Yukinori, do you hate me?”

Haruna looked at Tomonori with big eyes brimming with confidence. Seeing that, Tomonori shook her head fervently.

“I... definitely don’t. I’m...”

Haruna puffed her tiny chest out grandly. She looked quite proud of herself, even though I was pretty sure those breasts of hers would never grow into anything.

“I like you too! I came here ‘cuz I wanted to see the stars with Yukinori!”

“... Master.”

“I also only came to see the stars with Hellscythe-dono. I did not come here to observe perverts.”

**It’s best if we all see the stars together.**

“I... was an idiot. I didn’t think at all about how everyone else felt... I’m sorry. I’m really sorry! You’re right... we’re all here together, so we should go stargazing together!”

Well, I’m beat then. To think I’d let Haruna take all the good moments away from me in this conversation... oh well. I let out a chuckle, and waited for an opportune moment to speak up to Sera and Haruna.

“Can I ask a quick question?”

“Hm?”

“What?”

“Does that mean you hate me?”

“As much as nails on a chalkboard.”

Haruna even took the time to grind her teeth and wrap her arms around herself, wriggling around.

“I have accidentally called cockroaches ‘Ayumu’ in the past.”

Sera shut her eyes, seeming to be recollecting something.

**If only you were a bit less of a pervert...** Even Yuu?! That’s a bit of a shock.

“You all... okay then. In that case, why are you freeloading in my house?”

“It’s convenient.”

“Yes, I agree with that opinion.”

“What a shameless thing to say... okay! All of you are going without meals tomorrow!”

“Haahh?” Oh my, at that moment a voice like that of a Yakuza gangster just came out of Sera’s pretty pink lips.

“Ayumu, did you say something? Feels a bit cold around here.”

Oh my, she makes it almost sound like I was being cold!

“... Nothing. I haven’t the faintest idea what you might be talking about.”

I felt a tinge of loneliness running through me, and though I might take a leaf out of Haruna’s book and use the bear as a sofa replacement too. But the bear’s strong claws came down me... and tore up my shirt.

Ugh! This mountain is definitely going after my clothes!

**Chapter 3: Part 4**

Now that all the awkwardness had been cleared from the air, Tomonori returned to being the happy-go-lucky, innocent tomboy she usually was. We continued up the increasingly tough mountain path. Looking up, I saw that it was a new moon, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky either.

"It's cold..."

Haruna had her arms around her own body as she said that and glared at me. How many times has she complained about that already? Also, why are you glaring at me?! Just look at me! My jeans have no buttons, my parker has no sleeves, and even my inner shirt is filled with holes! How much of a devil did you have to be to look at someone like that and still whine?!

"Haruna, just repeating that complaint will not make things better."

"It's easy for you to say that. You're pretty insulated around the chest area after all..."

I shivered. Sure, I was shivering from the cold, but the icicle-like glare that Sera was sending me might've also had something to do with it...

"You should learn from Yuu. She's not complaining at all."



**I am used to it.** = “Yuu is okay! She’s pretty amazing, isn’t she, Oniichan?!”

Quick, Patrasche, use Yuu’s cute-version voice to warm up or you’ll freeze to death!<sup>1</sup>

“Oi, Yukinori! Just where will we go?!”

The cold seemed to be turning Haruna into the King of Laputa.

“It’s just a bit more! Let’s push forwards!”

Tomonori was leading the way with a skip in her steps, her energy still overflowing.

“I’ll give you three min- fnyann!”

“What was that just now?”

“Shut up! It was just a sneeze! You don’t have to raise a fuss about eve- fnyaan!”

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to *A Dog of Flanders*.

“That’s a pretty forced-sounding sneeze you’ve got there. Pretty hard to say, to be honest! It is cold, though.”

“Gorbchvu.”

I heard a weird word and turned around. I saw an expressionless girl there with a bit of red seeping into her cheeks. Yuu couldn’t talk, but I could’ve sworn that strange word had been said in her cute voice... wait, don’t tell me...

I turned back around to look at Haruna, when I heard it again.

“Gorbchvu.”

I turned around again, and saw Yuu with a gauntleted hand put up to her lips.

Wait... was I seriously right? Yuu’s sneezes sounded like “gorbchfu”?!

I stared at Yuu for a bit, but she didn’t seem about to sneeze again.

“I’ve heard that the temperature goes down by a degree for each two hundred meters you climb. Dressed like that, it’s possible they will catch colds.”

“In other words...”

I looked back and saw the mountain path we had been climbing continuing on for hundreds of meters. I really couldn't tell how far we had climbed anymore.

"General Secretary Gorbchvu."

Crap, I missed it again! And she even added the title this time!

"Ah, it's pretty cold..."

Haruna seemed to have returned to square one.

"Maybe we should play a game?"

Sera made that suggestion.

"What kind of game?" I asked that, and...

"From now on, whoever says the word 'cold' will get punched by everyone else."

"That's pretty terrifying, but I guess if there's no rule like that we'd end up saying it a lot."

“Exactly the point!”

**I will be the judge.** = “Sounds fun! But it’s not fair because Yuu can’t talk, so instead she’ll be watching oniichan and the others!”

“Eh? What what? Are we starting something?”

Tomonori looked back at us from her position at the head of the group, her eyes sparkling with interest.

“Yeah, it’s a game. Everyone’s been saying the word ‘cold’ too much, so...”

**Out.** = “Ahaha! Oniichan said it so fast!”

Haruna’s horizontal chop hit me right in the Adam’s apple and sent me into a coughing fit. Sera’s elbow also gouged into my stomach with pinpoint accuracy.

“Ah, I see! So we get punched if we say the word ‘cold.’”

Tomonori nodded, looking excited. She seriously was an idiot.

**Out.** = “Ah! You can’t say that!”

*Bam bam bam bam.*

Except for the judge Yuu, everyone whacked Tomonori and I flicked her in the forehead. We continued walking for another five minutes before coming upon a level clearing.

This area was larger than the clearing with the bear earlier, and a lot of trees and grass had already been cleared out by humans. There were barely any trees around; it was like someone had gouged out a part of the top of the mountain. And, other than the path we had used to get here behind us, there was blissfully nothing else to intrude on this scene.

“Fuwaaa~~.” Haruna made a sound like that.

“Oh hoh...” Sera seemed impressed.

Yeah, this was pretty incredible. It was like we were floating in the middle of the sky.

The night’s sky surrounded our entire field of view. There was not another light in sight.

The only sparkling things were the stars themselves, shining brightly above us.

This was an absolutely different sight than the glimpses of the night sky I had gotten on the way up here. I could see stars in every direction, and felt like I was soaring. I almost wanted to just sprawl down on the ground right here. It was seriously an impressive sight.

“Amazing, right?”

Tomonori put both her hands in the air and was twirling around.

“It’s like the lights from when the Space Sheriff puts on his combat suit are sparkling all around us!”

“That’s a pretty obscure reference, but looks like Haruna likes it too.”

Since when could the stars be as bright as this? Since when could they feel so close, as if I could just reach out and grab them? When the stars were so clear and bright above me, it just made me want to trace them out with my fingers. I wonder if the people who made up the constellations had once also stood atop a place like this, looking up at the brilliant night sky.

**Wonderful.** = “Uwaah~~ So romantic~~!”

“It makes it all the more worth it that we had a long hike up here.”

“Yeah. It was definitely worth coming all this way for this.”

Yuu seemed to notice something and looked at another direction. I followed her gaze and looked to the side. Please don't tell me there's another swarm of bees or something...

But no, all I saw was a streak of light.

**Shooting star.** = “Look look oniichan! It's a shooting star!”

It wasn't just one. There was another one, and another one, and another.

Tomonori suddenly began to run around, almost like she was trying to chase after the shooting stars.

“This is what I wanted to show you! You can't see this too well in town, but here you can see it really good!”

“Pretty amazing...”

**Those are the Leonids.**

Leonids, huh...? Last year, I remember seeing stuff on TV about how amazing the Leonids were, and I ended up waiting to see them from my room, but was pretty disappointed when nothing happened.

I was so excited back then...

But today I realized that you couldn't have any other lights on in order to see the stars. Even the moon would be a bother in stargazing.

Today, the moon was a new moon, and because we were in the middle of the mountains, there were no other lights.

Only the twinkling of the stars above us in the inky black sky ensured that we weren't completely enshrouded in darkness. That's not something you would ever be able to see back in Tokyo.

"The Leonids are my favorite shooting stars. That's why, every year, on the day when there's the most shooting stars, I come up here to stargaze!"

I see. So this happened every year in November then. I didn't know that.

We continued to gaze up earnestly into the night sky at those streaks of light.

"That one is really huge! Whoa!"



Haruna pointed to an especially bright star. She sure liked big things... maybe it was because she was so small.

“Yeah yeah! Pretty cool! But if you went on that star and looked back at this planet, you’d probably think the same thing... nah, I’m sure this planet would be even brighter!”

Tomonori was clearly in the highest of spirits, and I found myself a bit taken by her words.

“Going on that star and looking at this planet... I don’t think I’ve ever thought of things that way.”

“I’m sure the people living on that star are looking at us and making our planet part of triangle constellations and then coming up with all sorts of myths about us... doesn’t that just make your heart flutter a bit?”

“A bit... yeah.”

**I like the view below too.** = “Yuu also thinks the stuff under us is pretty!”

“View below?”

Yuu took me by the hand and led me to a corner of the clearing. There, I saw a steep slope, almost as if someone had cut a part of the mountain off. But past that I could see glittering city lights.

I had been focused so much on the night sky above us that I didn't realize how pretty the city was below.

**The never-changing stars in the sky above are beautiful. But the ever-changing stars below are also beautiful.**

"Ever-changing stars... huh?"

Those stars below were the stars of life. They were proof that there were humans down there out and about, but they definitely shone like stars all the same.

"Seeing something like this really fills you with a sense of purpose, doesn't it?"

"Yeah! Us vampire ninjas work hard to protect those lights down there!"

"It really feels like we're completely surrounded by stars, doesn't it?"

It wasn't just up in the sky. The ground below was also overflowing with stars. Just thinking about that made my heart itch a bit... I really wanted to stay up here and keep gazing upon this sight forever.

**I want to come again.**

“Yeah. Next year, with everyone together...”

“Eh? We can come in two weeks to see the Geminids too!”

“...”

“Eh? Hm? Aikawa?”

“Well, to be honest... that’s a bit...”

“Yeah... I really don’t wanna come that much.”

Haruna ended up saying those difficult words for me without a single ounce of hesitation.

“Hey hey! What’s going on?! This is pretty amazing! Really amazing! What happened to all that excitement a minute ago?!”

“Sorry, but the week after next is a bit...”

**Even if I come here every day I don't mind.**

“Eucliwood Hellscythe is a goddess!”

Tomonori was near tears as she gripped one of Yuu's gauntleted hands with both her own and started shaking it.

“But, thanks... Yuki. This is the first time I've seen this beautiful of a starry sky.”

Tomonori's eyes widened as she stared at me, before she flashed me her pearly whites.

“Let's definitely come here again! ... Ayumu.”

We heard a rustling noise, before seeing a bear appear on the path we had taken up. But it wasn't just a bear. There was also a raccoon, and a monkey, and all sorts of other animals. Had they all come to look at the stars?

**The more the merrier.**

Yuu, had you called all these others here? Did our resident necromancer really have the ability to do something like that?

“I-I-I-I-It’s a bear! A-And a monkey! And a boar!”

Tomonori cowered behind my back.

“Calm down. It’s fine.”

“But... I have a cat allergy!”

It was honestly a bit refreshing watching Tomonori trembling with her eyes closed like that, so I couldn’t help but laugh.

“They’re not going to hurt us, right?” I asked Yuu that.

**They won’t bite.**

“See? It’s fine. Calm down.” I smacked Tomonori lightly on the head.

“B-But...” Tomonori still didn’t seem completely convinced as she began to rub the spot where I had hit her.

I went over to the bear and rubbed its head, in an attempt to show Tomonori that everything was fine.

The bear's eyes were filled with kindness... as it cut through my clothes.

The boar and the monkey started trying to tear off my jeans.

“Agh! W-Wait, no! NOOoooooooooooo~~!!”

I soon found myself stripped of everything I had. It was as if I had just been attacked by mountain bandits.

Why was everyone after my clothes today?!

**The animals do not like Ayumu.**

“I just met them though! So it's just like how Haruna and Sera didn't like me from first sight... why?”

**Because they like that girl.**

Yuu was looking at... Tomonori. I see. Tomonori had visited this mountain many times in order to look at the stars. So maybe all the other animals thought of her as a friend?

**Ayumu is teasing her. So they think of him as an enemy.**

“Ehhhh... but...” I started to object. Certainly, when the bear had first come upon us, it might’ve looked like I had pushed Tomonori to the ground. And I just whacked Tomonori on the head, so... ugh, these damn animals. Maybe I’ll show them who’s boss...

But at that moment, seeing me stripped bare, Tomonori gave me a big smile.

Seeing that, I realized how ridiculous this situation was, and I began to laugh as well.

“Ugh, it seems that our trip to look at the stars has turned into a trip to look at an immense pervert. Disgusting.”

Sera looked at me with quiet, cruel eyes, as if she was looking at something dirty on the floor.

“Your eyes, your words... they’re way too cold! Seriously, I’m getting chilled to the very bone here!”

I wrapped my arms around my own body.

**Out.** = “Okaay~~, we got a ‘cold’ from oniichan!”

“Eh?”

Were we still playing that game?!

At that point, I received punishment from everyone in the clearing, animals included.



**Chapter 3: Part 5**

After retelling the story of our stargazing trip, Tomonori leisurely walked into the middle of the courtroom to finish her testimony.

“Hey, Yuki-chan. All I got from that story is that Aikawa is a huge perv.”

Mihara smiled as she said that, her makeup as perfect as always.

“But, when I asked, Kanami and Hiramatsu wouldn’t go stargazing with me, but Aikawa would! He’s a really good guy! I was seriously moved!”

My lawyer was next to me with her eyes closed tight, trying hard to convince the jury.

“Hueh? I also told you I’d go with you...”

Judge Haruma seemed to be quite unsatisfied at these proceedings, and her ahoge drooped.

“Yeah, I was seriously moved by that too!”

“Is that the only point you were trying to make with your story?”

The prosecutor glared at Tomonori, not able to suppress her annoyance.

“Eh? Umm... I just wanted to testify that Aikawa isn’t the kind of person who would do something bad on purpose.”

“And do you really think you’ve succeeded? Not only did he pull down my pants, but he also treated me to a hideous strip show under the starry night sky. Your Honor, the prosecution recommends an eternity in Hell.”

“Lock him in a locker for three years!”

T-That’s way more harsh than I had imagined. As my face cramped up, Tomonori frantically shook her head and waved her hands in the air.

“No no, that’s not it! Aikawa was attacked by a bear and he was just protecting me. Umm... so, that’s why stuff happened. It’s not like Aikawa had any evil intentions at all! And uhh, uhh... something’s a bit weird about all this...”

“This conversation doesn’t seem to be going anywhere.”

Sera sent a condescending smile at Tomonori.

“Can I make a quick remark?”

The handsome English prince Anderson-kun raised his hand from the juror's box.

"Doesn't it seem that Aikawa has already gotten punished for everything? He was made into a Nessie, his jeans got blown to shreds, he was attacked by a bear, and at the end of it all he was lynched by an entire group."

"Y-Yeah! That's it! That's what was weird! Sure, Aikawa did some pervy things and stuff, but for some reason I could forgive all of that. Orito's stuff I'll never ever never ever never ever forgive, but... yeah, it's because Aikawa always had something terrible happen to him after! And if you add a plus hundred to a minus hundred, you'll get a plus hundred back!"

Tomonori pleaded with the court. Hiramatsu didn't seem to be able to ignore one detail in that little speech, so she turned to Orito next to her and spoke up.

"Why... was the total a positive number?"

"Because she's an idiot."

Orito answered immediately. Well, if Orito hadn't said that, I probably would've said it instead.

"Actually, I want to accuse Seraphim of being way too defensive!"

Uh oh, what a drastic turn of events. To think Tomonori would play that card... maybe I could even win this thing. A small glimmer of hope lit up within me. Onwards, to the next short story!

Good evening. Aikawa Ayumu here. There's someone really noisy next to me right now.

"Haruna, there's something I want to ask you..."

"Of course. I'm a genius after all. What is it?"

"What kinds of things do gentlemen like?"

Well, I like girls who wear cute outfits.

"Good question good question! Well, it's that! The three-pronged rule!"

"Three-pronged rule, you say?"

Well, I think sexy outfits is better. Like leotards or something.

"Yeah! Three things. Friendship, effort, and... meat and potato stew!"

"I see... thank you. That was useful."

Other things I like... hmm... I guess meat and potato stew was nice too.

CHAPTER 4

**"Welcome to the Danger Zone!"**  
Yeah, this time is one of those stories.





**Chapter 4 – Welcome to the Danger Zone!****Chapter 4: Part 1**

Someone was humming.

It was a light, jaunty little tune, reminiscent of the opening to Zenigata Heiji.

I walked down the hallway connecting the entranceway to the kitchen on the first floor of my house. It was the same walk I had done hundreds, if not thousands of times.

The humming was coming from the kitchen. In the opposite direction, from the entranceway...

“Yeah... yeah... tomorrow. Mhmm... yeah, guess I gotta...”

Someone was on the phone. That someone was a brown-haired little girl who was twirling the phone cord around her finger while her ahoge bounced from side to side. Her name was Haruna, and she was our resident idiot.

I soon found myself standing in front of the kitchen together with a silver-haired girl.

She was wearing armor and gauntlets, and although her face was expressionless, I could gauge a hint of unease in her eyes as she looked up at me.

“Don’t worry, Yuu. I’ll definitely... put a stop to this.”

I put a hand on her shoulder and smiled. Yuu dipped her jaw just slightly, signifying a nod.

Okay... I steeled myself and very timidly took a step into the kitchen.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Ayumu. Is there something you need?”

There was a girl wearing an apron in the kitchen. Her long, luxurious black hair was bundled up into a ponytail, and she was a girl of unrivaled beauty. She also always had a dignified, uncompromising expression on her face.

Her large breasts asserted their presence to all there bearing witness, and her slender, feminine body was just... I really just couldn’t get enough of it. Looking at her just brought sigh after sigh of admiration to my lips.

Her usually cold expression softened a bit, and a kind voice came out from her soft lips.

“Don’t worry, everything will be ready soon. Please wait in the living room.”



That sweet voice of hers was probably coming from the very bottom of her heart. I could count on one hand the number of times this year I've heard such a sweet, kind voice directed at me.

But, I needed to say something here.

For the sake of Yuu, who was still standing behind me... for my sake... for Sera's sake... I would carry out my duties as the master of this house!

My face had softened into a smile, but I hardened it once again.

"Sera." My voice came out even lower than I had expected.

"What is it?"

Sera sounded pretty happy right now. She was as happy as office ladies uki uki watching<sup>1</sup> at noontime. She always had such a cool demeanor (and was absolutely icy when it came to me), that seeing her like this... ugh, it was just so cute.

But... I still had to say it. I narrowed my eyes and spoke to Sera in a serious voice.

"Sera... you really don't have to cook."

---

<sup>1</sup> A reference to the opening theme of Waratte itomo!, a popular variety show that airs around lunchtime. Last episode aired in 2014 though.

**Chapter 4: Part 2**

It was the next day. My school was pretty stingy with the heater, so I was freezing in my classroom as a girl glared at me.

She was a pretty girl, with an expression just as commanding as Sera's. In fact, if Sera was one level more strict and let her hair down, then she would probably feel something like this.

Her name was Saras. She was Sera's commanding officer in that weird group of vampire ninjas that Sera was a part of. As for why these vampire ninjas were attending the same school as I was... well, I still didn't quite know.

Anyways, that's not important right now. What was important was that Saras was holding onto a ninja-y looking scroll and looking down at me with her arms crossed.

"... and that's pretty much what happened."

It seemed like Sera had asked Saras for a good recipe, and I was charged with getting that recipe from Saras. But for some reason, Saras seemed a bit reluctant right now.

"I was wondering why I got that emergency call, but it was for something like this... Seraphim is a moron."

“You know about Sera’s cooking, right? I really want her to be able to cook a proper meal.”

Saras let out a single chuckle.

“My darling, do you really think you can help with that?”

“I’m going to try. Also, can you stop it with that nickname?”

I had no idea what Saras was thinking, but apparently she liked me. Well, to be precise, she liked the shape of my butt. So, even though we technically weren’t dating each other, she started calling me “my darling.”

“Hmph, saying that even though you’re clearly happy about it... what a cute guy you are.”

She wasn’t like this before either... so when in the world had she gotten all deredere on me...?

“You’re a tsundere as always, aren’t you?”

“Hm? I couldn’t hear you very well, but you weren’t just mocking me, were you? Depending on what you said, you may find yourself soon sinking to the bottom of the ocean with all the other seaweed.”

“Nothing. It was nothing. Come on, just give me that recipe.”

“I will, my darling. But, you should know that this is a meat and potato stew recipe written by Katsushika Hokusai.”

Seriously?! This was a meat and potato stew recipe written by that famous ukiyo-e painter?! That was so damn interesting that I could feel myself drooling already. But...

“Stop lying.”

“Well, it’s just a rumor. I have no proof that it’s a lie though.”

What the hell? I looked at Saras and we shared a laugh when another girl came into the classroom. She came in with a sunny smile, bright like a blooming sunflower.

“Aiiikawa~~. What’s that?”

Her name was Yoshida Yuki, and she was also a vampire ninja, the same as Sera and Saras. However, it didn't seem that she got along very well with the other two.

She was also my precious friend who kept me company every day in the classroom as I waited for nightfall.

"Hey, Tomonori. This is a meat and potato stew recipe."

"Looks pretty fancy."

Well, it was written on a scroll, so I guess it looked really fancy for a recipe.

"Well, I've faithfully delivered the goods. I will pray for Seraphim's steady progress. I'll take my leave."

Saras began taking out her cellphone as she walked out the door. I didn't say a word, just raised a hand in farewell. She also raised a hand in response.

In Saras's place, Tomonori now leapt to my seat. Even though it was winter, she was still brimming with energy.

"Seems like Katsushika Hokusai wrote this recipe."

“Pretty cool. Pretty cool~~. I want a recipe like that too~~.”

Tomonori’s eyes sparkled. Well, I admit that if this really was Katsushika Hokusai’s recipe, I really, *really* wanted to give it a try.

In fact, I was so curious at this point that I unfurled the scroll right there and then.

What was written inside was... such fancy cursive that I couldn’t read a word of it.

“Tomonori...”

“Hm? What’s up?”

“Can you read this?”

“Umm...”

Tomonori popped her head over and checked the contents, after which she gave me a bold smile.

“Ufufufu. Aikawa, don’t tell me you can’t read this~~?”

To think the day would come when Tomonori would be making fun of me...

“You’re telling me an idiot like you can read this...?”

“Don’t forget that I’m still a ninja! There are even people who write their orders using these kinds of letters.”

I guess even idiots could make something of themselves if they tried hard enough. Also, Tomonori sure looked like she really wanted something right now...

“H-Hey, Aikawa...”

“What is it?”

“It’s a bit hard to say this, but... could you lend me that today?”

“I had a sneaking suspicion you wanted this, but today?”

“Yeah. I’m getting a cooking lesson with Master today, you see... but we haven’t figured out what we want to cook yet. But yeah, if it’s meat and potato stew, I should already have most of the ingredients in my fridge.”

Now that I thought about it, Haruna was on the phone yesterday. Had Tomonori been on the other end of that call?

In stark contrast to Sera, Haruna was pretty much the best chef of all time. Seriously, that wasn't even really an exaggeration. Tomonori had seen that, so now and then she would ask Haruna for cooking lessons and had sort of become Haruna's disciple.

This scroll was something that Saras had brought for me to give to Sera. But, when I saw Tomonori standing there with her hands clapped together and that pleading look in her eyes... well, it just made me want to say "fine, I guess."

I thought about what to do for a bit longer.

Well... fine, I guess.



**Chapter 4: Part 3**

As soon as I got home from school, I found myself on my knees in the hallway connecting the entranceway to the kitchen.

“So... then you actually gave it to her?”

A harsh voice rained down on me from above like countless sharp blades.

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

I apologized while looking down at the floor.

I took a moment to risk a glance upwards and saw a ponytailed girl looking down at me with cold eyes, her arms crossed. She reaaaaally didn’t look happy. Well, that was my fault.

“You can’t do a simple errand?”

“Sorry...”

“Do you have any idea what that scroll was?”

“It was a potato and meat stew recipe... sorry.”

“Don’t think that it was just a simple recipe. That was a precious document.”

“Well... umm, I can just get it back tomorrow...”

“Tomorrow? That would be too late. I always vaguely felt that the inside of your head is disgusting, but to think it was this awful...”

“I got it, I got it. I’ll call her now and get it back. Then everything will be okay, right?”

I tried to stand up... but was kicked back down.

“Who told you that you could get up?”

“I’m sorry.”

I quickly fished out my cell phone while still on my knees.

Sera still had her arms crossed as she kicked me in the behind, her eyes dyed red. Vampire ninja eyes went red when they used their superhuman vampire powers to annihilate the enemy. It was the color of war.

I nervously glanced at her eyes as I dialed out to Tomonori. But the person who picked up was...

“You’ve reached the genius girl. Ayumu, what’s up?”

“Why do you have Tomonori’s phone?”

“Yukinori is... potatoing right now.”

“Potatoing? Don’t think I’ve ever heard that word befo- umph.”

Sera poked me hard. It seemed like she wanted me to get to the point.

“Well, I wanted to ask about that meat and potatoes recipe...”

“Ah, that thing. There was a pretty cool drawing in that scroll! I liked it!”

“That’s great and all, but-“

“So I’ve decided! I’m gonna go to Virie with it tomorrow. I’m sure Dai-sensei would love it!”

“W-Wait, Haruna! That’s Sera’s scroll. Give it back! Give it back right now! Give it back before my body gets torn apart like Meat-kun!”<sup>1</sup>

“Huh? You want this back? But this is already mine.”

And here’s where Haruna’s arrogance started getting in my way. Ugh...

“Come on, Haruna.”

“Ah, by the way, I’ll be staying over at Yukinori’s place tonight. If you want it back, why don’t you come take it from me? Nyahahaha~~.”

“You’ve sure got some nerve, you little brat-“

The phone call cut off, leaving me staring at my phone screen. I called out to Sera.

“Haruna challenged us to go take it by force. She uhh... also called you a strange-breasted woman.”

“Strange breasts?! I can’t let her get away with that.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Character from Kinnikuman.

“So... what are you going to do, Sera?”

But I already knew the answer to that question. I started thinking about how exactly I was going to rake Haruna over the coals.

**Chapter 4: Part 4**

In order to figure out how we were going to meet Haruna's challenge and steal that potato and meat stew recipe back from her, we held a strategy meeting.

Yuu and Sera were wearing the same outfit in the living room, looking quite serious. Meanwhile, I...

"Why the hell do I have to wear this embarrassing thing?!"

I couldn't look serious at all in this. For some odd reason, all three of us were wearing leotards while sitting under our kotatsu.

"Stop being annoying and raising a fuss. Although, certainly... I suppose a girl wearing this outfit might feel a bit embarrassed..."

Sera was wearing a blue leotard with an open neckline. That beautiful exposed area from her neck down to her chest was a force to be reckoned with. This was a leotard that really accentuated her breasts.

"Gender doesn't matter at all! Actually, for guys this goes way past 'a bit embarrassed'! It's super embarrassing!"

Yuu was still wearing her gauntlets above a dark-purple leotard, and she didn't look the least bit embarrassed. Actually, I think Sera had mentioned something about Yuu being the one who had picked out these outfits.

**These are necessary.** = "Oniichan! This is the proper way to dress here, so stop being embarrassed!"

Proper way to dress... what kind of situation called for a leotard with a ribbon wrapped around the middle? But I kept that retort in my head.

Yuu looked so cute in her leotard that there was no way I would say anything against it.

"That is what Hellsythe-dono has said, at least. To be honest, this was not my original intention either."

"There are plenty of warmer outfits we could wear if we're going to go do a robbery..."

**There are three of us, so this is the outfit.** = "I wanna go as the Mysterious Girls, oniichan~!"

"Anyway, let's think of a strategy."

Sera spread out a bunch of papers on the table and began pointing to them with her index finger while she started her explanation.

“First off, we have two possible entry points. Here and here.”

Tomonori’s room was on the inside of the first floor. So we could go for it either straight on or through the veranda.

“We probably should go in through the veranda.”

“That would certainly be the standard play, but the veranda is too wide and visible. If somebody is in this room, they would be able to easily see us.”

“Does it really matter if anybody sees us?”

Yuu nodded her head.

**That goes against the aesthetics of thievery.** = “We get to finally play thief! I wanna do it right, oniichan!”

Yuu left that memo on the table and took a sip of her hot tea.

“It seems like that is what Hellscythe-dono thinks...”



“Fine fine. I got it. I guess it would be annoying if Haruna found us and started making fun of us, and I do want to see her face when she realizes the recipe is gone. But you know, there’s also a certain thrill in getting discovered.”

“Fufu, quite true. Well then, based on this discussion, exactly which entry point shall we use?”

Yuu’s gauntleted hand began to move. It ended up pointing at... the front entrance.

“As expected from Hellscythe-dono, picking the more difficult option. They say that the more difficult the task, the more rewarding it will be.”

“Okay then... so how exactly are we going to unlock the door?”

“Before that, we need to discuss how to deal with the infrared sensors.”

Infrared sensors...? You mean those things that will send off an alarm once you touch them?!

“Exactly what happens if you touch one of these infrared sensors?”

Like Yuu, I started drinking my own cup of hot tea.

“You will die.”

Pffchh! I spat out my tea at Sera’s sharp words.

“Liar! This is Japan! ... Why the hell would you install something like that?”

“Are you trying to apply common folk logic to us? Those are installed to repel demons. Only vampire ninjas live in that house after all.”

I see. Vampire ninjas had the duty of exterminating demons and monsters to protect normal people. So it’s natural that they might get attacked themselves, and in that case, the first place they’d want to heavily fortify would be the place they slept.

“Ugh. So, what kind of system is in place...?”

“If you do not enter the password at the entrance to the house, you will end up tripping the security system.”

“Okay. Let’s ask Tomonori for the password then.”

**Once again, poor aesthetics.** = “Oniichan! You can’t do that!”

*Nod.* Sera and Yuu both gave me a nod. Geez, these two...

“By the way... can I just ask one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Didn’t we change into our leotards just a bit too early?”

“That might be.”

**Against aesthetics.**

That was way too philosophical for me! I mean, seriously, could you imagine the three cat-eyed sisters<sup>1</sup> in leotards during a strategy meeting?!

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<sup>1</sup> A referene to Cat's Eye, a manga series. Thanks to jorgelotr for the clarification.

**Chapter 4: Part 5**

It was cold. It was damn near freezing. I really wished I had a scarf or something around my waist right now instead of a ribbon...

The clock had just struck midnight. The three of us were bounding through the dark night sky, watching as our breaths turned into white mist in front of us as if we had been smoking cigarettes. Being in this getup wouldn't have been bad if it was summer, but it was just downright brutal in the winter. Well, I guess we wouldn't want to go against Yuu's sense of aesthetics, so whatever...

However...

"Hey, Sera."

"What is it?"

"I can see why your leotard is blue and Yuu's is purple... but why is mine orange? It'll be really hard to blend in with the night in this color."

"It can't be helped. That color just fits your character."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?!"

**Aesthetic.** = “Eheheh. I guess I just wanted to, oniichan!”

“Do you intend to explain every little thing with aesthetics?”

“We’ve arrived.”

Tomonori’s place was pretty far from mine. Ugh, making me come all this way in this leotard...

In any case, we were now in front of Tomonori’s apartment building.

It was a fancy-looking brick apartment building. To think she would be living in a nice place like this... oh wait, Sera mentioned that only vampire ninjas lived here, right? That’s some pretty impressive company housing.

But seriously, I was freezing out here, so I quickly made my way through the outer door of the building.

There were a few mailboxes lined up around me, and I saw mailboxes for “Yoshida” as well as “Hoshikawa” there.

Hoshikawa was Saras’s fake name, right? So she was living in this building too?

There was a glass door across from us, and I could see around five meters past the door before another glass door showed up. Exactly what did they need that extra five meters for...?

“Ayumu. Wear this.”

Sera passed me a strange pair of goggles. I put them on and... ahh, this was one of those infrared sensor goggles.

I could see a giant tangle of infrared lines running past that five-meter long, two-meter wide space past the glass door.

“Well, that’s pretty impressive.”

“There are plenty of gaps though. However, if you touch one of those beams...”

Sera had said I would die, right? Did that mean that an alarm would go off and then swarms of vampire ninjas would come streaming in?

“Well then... Let us proceed.”

Sera headed for the door, her leotard accentuating her remarkably well-proportioned body.

She put one of her long fingers on a panel right next to the door, and the glass door opened. It really didn't look like she had entered any kind of password or anything...

"Wait, that door opened really normally."

I quickly went through the glass door to the other side, still wearing my goggles.

"If you can pass through this area, then the rest of the building is no different from a normal building."

"I see. Okay, let me try."

It looked like I might be able to squeak by if I just crawled along. Okay...

I plastered myself as low to the ground as possible and began to crawl.

"Ahh, I forgot to tell you something."

I slowly continued to move forwards. That one was close... if I was just a bit more careless I would've tripped a sensor. Ah, that was seriously clo- *kch*.

"Hyaaaaaaahhh!!"

I was a zombie who felt no pain, but I still let out a strange scream.

But I mean, if you felt a bamboo spear skewering you in the ass, then you'd scream too, right?

"Ueeeehhhhhhh!!!"

My hips went too high in the air and tripped a sensor. And then, another bamboo spear flew right into my ass.

"Tuwaaahhhh!!"

My hips shook a bit and one of the bamboo spears tripped another sensor.

"Zyaaaaghghhh!!"

More bamboo spears went right into my behind like it was the most natural thing in the world. Why my ass?! Why only my ass?!

"I forgot to tell you that there are other sensors in the ground as well, so crawling would not be the optimal strategy."



Why are you telling me that *now*?! Tell me that during the strategy meeting, dammit! Agh! God dammit!

**Almost like the Top Gun opening.** = “Your screams sound like the chorus to *Danger Zone*!”

Why did Yuu have a kind of satisfied look in her eyes?

“Yes, I’m completely in a danger zone right now. Could you please help me out?”

If I moved, the bamboo spears would definitely knock into another sensor. But my ass was starting to shake... what exactly should I do here?

“There is a release button on the other side here. Please stay there and do not move. Hellsycthe-dono... if you would.”

Yuu was readying something that looked like a crossbow.

She shot that crossbow, sending a suction cup arrow out, attached to a rope.

I heard a small *pop*, before seeing that the arrow had stuck itself to the glass door on the opposite side.

It had also brilliantly flown exactly between all the infrared beams. Ah, I see. They could follow that rope now to get past the beams.

Yuu held one end of the rope while Sera latched onto it with her supple body.

*Slide... slide... slide...* Sera slowly advanced. Her ponytail had been bundled up so that her hair didn't trigger any of the sensors.

She passed right above my head as I still lay on the ground. She seemed a bit tense but was still moving forward smoothly.

Good, good. At this rate, we'll make it-

"Gorbchvu."

At that moment... I heard a weird sound coming from Yuu's direction.

Making as few movements as possible, I took a look in her direction and saw that she was holding a gauntleted hand up to her mouth.

Ahh, she sneezed. She's been in a leotard all this time, so it's not a big surprise.

Because of that, Yuu loosened her grip on the rope a bit. I looked up, a bit worried about Sera, and was treated to the sight of a beautiful butt above me. A beautiful, feminine butt that was clean from bamboo spear puncture wounds.

I gave a gasp, and then felt the heel of a foot come down on the back of my head. It seems Sera had lost her balance when the rope went momentarily slack. Well, that and she probably also just wanted to hit me.

Also, what's with that sigh of relief?! I'm suffering down here, dammit!

It seemed that Sera had been able to keep herself up by putting a foot on my head and a hand on the wall.

Like that, Sera managed to safely find her way to the other side and then opened the glass door there.

"Ah."

"Oh."

My voice and Sera's voice rang out at the same time.

The rope with the suction cup was still attached to the door. So, opening that door meant...



“Well, Ayumu. You see, Dragon Magazine is celebrating its 300th issue now.”<sup>1</sup>

“Huh?”

“So, in celebration, I will wait here until you are struck by 300 spears.”

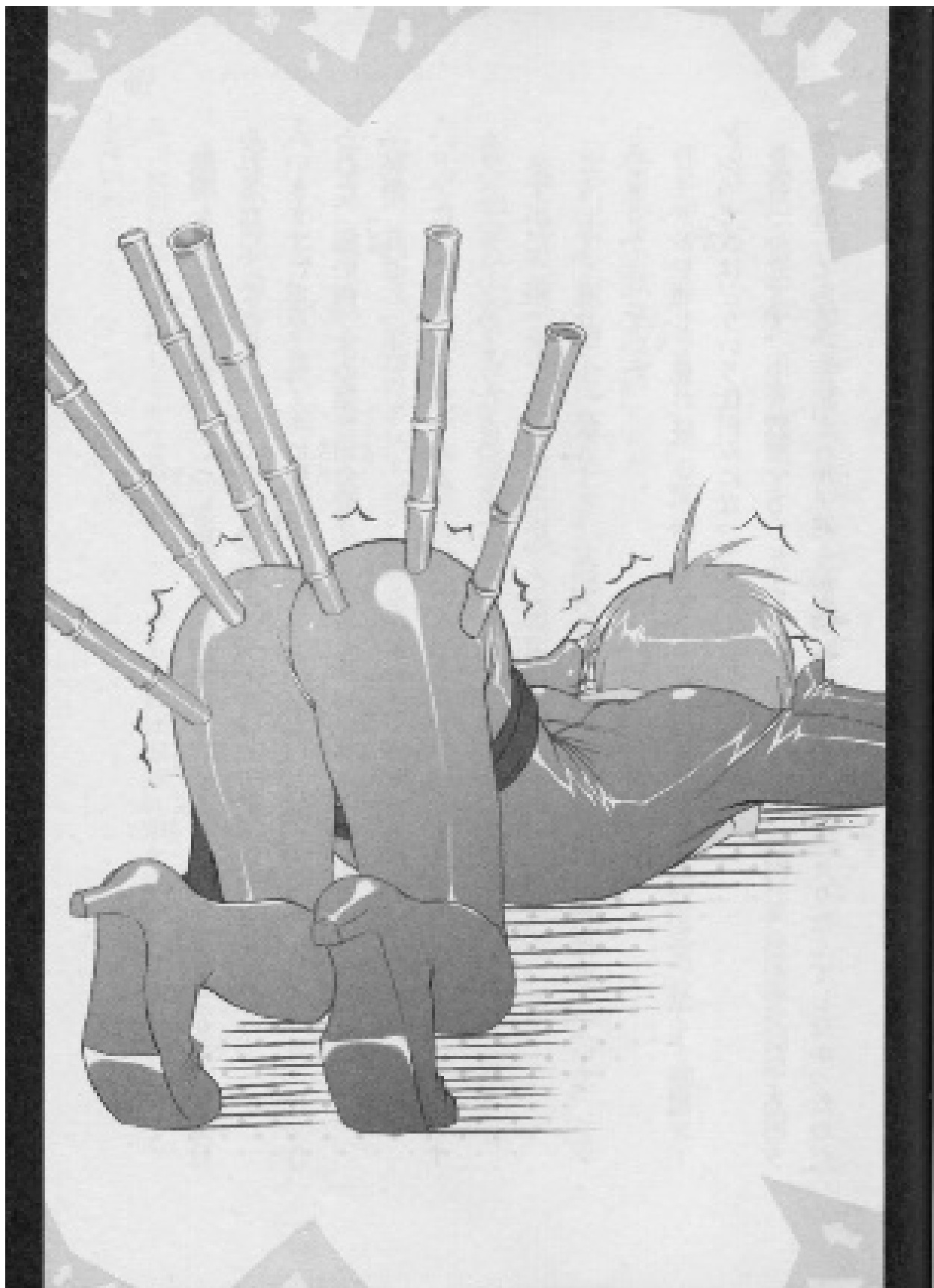
“I see... well, I guess in that case... no, shut up! What the hell are you saying, you idiot?!”

**Only 280 more.** = “Oniichan! It’ll just be a bit more! Hang in there!”

“I think getting hit by 20 of those things is more than enough, dammit!”

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally, all the short stories that comprise Volume 6 were printed in Dragon Magazine. So this is a very big break-the-fourth-wall moment.



**Chapter 4: Part 6**

After clearing these obstacles, we finally arrived in front of Tomonori's room. Now, if there was an easy way to open automatic locks, then this world would be overflowing with thieves. So what should we do here...?

"Here I go." Sera's hair was back into a ponytail, and she was holding onto a green-colored sword. It was a thin sword made from a leaf. Exactly what was she planning to do with that sword of hers...? Don't tell me...

"Hiken, Tsubamegaeshi!"

A big sideways V was cut into the door. Next, Yuu gave the door a whack with what looked almost like a bathroom plunger, and the door instantly crumbled into pieces.

As expected... Sera could cut through a damn door with a sword.

Like that, we were able to safely pass into Tomonori's room. Her room was a corner room with kitchen, bath, and two bedrooms. None of the lights were on, and the entire room was enveloped in silence.

The room was completely dark, but through these goggles I could figure out where everything is. Wow, I really wonder how night vision goggles worked...

We walked on silent footsteps. We passed by a table with plates that they had probably used to eat the meat and potato stew. This was Haruna and Tomonori we were talking about, so it wasn't surprising that they hadn't washed the dishes directly after eating. I wonder why I got the sudden urge to go and actually wash those plates...

Sera grabbed the doorknob to the closet closest to her and signaled me to search the innermost bedroom.

I dutifully obeyed and headed for that room. I opened the door casually and without a second thought. At this point, I really didn't feel like playing pretend burglar anymore.

I mean, I had gotten three hundred bamboo spears in the ass, and my leotard now had a huge hole there. Can you blame me for just not feeling it anymore?

I looked around the dark room. It was a plain, kind of boring room, the kind of room I couldn't imagine a girl using. There were pro wrestling posters and some netting on the walls, into which someone had put basketballs and soccer balls and that kind of thing. I also saw a basket filled with baseball gloves.

And then, there was a huge fluffy-looking bed that looked like it belonged in a fancy hotel. Tomonori and Haruna were both in the bed, lined up and asleep. These girls sure got along pretty well.



It was already past midnight, and neither of them were zombies, so it wasn't surprising that they'd both be asleep.

Okay, so where would they have put something like a scroll...? I almost felt like some RPG hero on a search quest as I looked around the room. Well, granted, it's not like I'd just go around and barbarically break all the jars and vases though...

I opened up a dresser. The first drawer... then the second drawer... but all I found were clothes. Nothing like a scroll anywhere.

Actually, maybe I should borrow one of Tomonori's jerseys? I mean, we might not be the same size, but it'd be better than going around wearing a leotard with a hole in the butt portion.

Oh, the bottom drawer seemed to all be underwear. Hmm, why do girls have to roll all their underwear up before putting them away? Oh look, there are some black ones here too. Wow, that's so unlike her...

*Ahem.* I'm here to find a scroll. Scroll scroll scroll. Doesn't look like the scroll is here.

I looked over to the table, her bookbag, and the sofa... they were all pretty tidy. Hm, I wouldn't have expected Tomonori to be so neat. I guess she didn't wash the dishes because Haruna was here?

I then took a look at the two girls looking oh so comfortable on that big fluffy bed.

Tomonori was wearing pajamas, while Haruna was in a tanktop. Haruna had kicked the feather futon away from the two of them so neither was covered. Maybe that had made them cold since both of their bodies were curled up. Also, it was pretty weird that Haruna slept in a tanktop and underwear even in the winter...

Hm? Now that I got a better look, I saw a scroll tucked up in between Haruna's tank top...

It seemed that Haruna had hidden the scroll in between her breasts. Hey hey, you had to have pretty big breasts to pull that off! I could understand if Tomonori did this, but it was pretty easy to spot the scroll when Haruna tried!

I slowly reached my hand out towards the bed. *Creak*. I froze. Did I wake them up?

The two of them were still breathing slowly so it seemed I was safe. I let out a sigh of relief even though my heart was still racing.

At this point, I had raised every single "wake-up" flag in the world.



I mean, I was here in a leotard with my ass bare, I had gone fishing through Tomonori's underwear drawer, and now I was reaching out to the two girls on the bed.

If this was a romantic comedy, then this would definitely be the point where the two of them would wake up and start screeching at me. But I wouldn't make that mistake. I had quite a bit of confidence in my dexterity.

It's said that when a master swordsman kills an enemy, he can do it so skillfully that the enemy won't feel a bit of pain. I'll take a leaf out of that book and get that scroll without Haruna feeling anything...

I softly grabbed the scroll and began to carefully pull. It didn't matter how much time I took as long as I got what I came for.

Snake! Think back to all those games of Operation you played!<sup>1</sup>

I pulled on Haruna's tanktop, and I got a glance at her nipples... wait, why wasn't she wearing a bra?! Ugh, crap! I could feel a line of drool come out... that drool... it was heading right for Tomonori's cheek!

But, if I let go of the scroll at this point... w-what should I do?!

---

<sup>1</sup> The actual game referenced is "denryuu iraira bou," a game which features similar "don't touch the sides" game mechanics.

When things came to this... I steeled myself and forcefully pulled the scroll out.

Like a magician with a tablecloth, I managed to pull the scroll out clean as a whistle. The two girls didn't show any sign of waking up. That was perfect. As I reveled in my own success, I began to wipe off the drool that was coming from my mouth...

But while I was doing that, I heard a strange chime coming from the other side of the door.

Hm? What was that? I was so distracted by that sound that I didn't notice... didn't notice that there was a string attached to the scroll. Crap... was this thing booby trapped?!

"Agh!" The three hundred and first bamboo spear pierced into my behind.

Dammit, I really shouldn't have tried to wipe off that drool. I watched as the drool flew through the air and landed right on Haruna's ahoge.

I thought I heard a *ping!* somewhere as Haruna's catlike eyes opened. It seemed like her ahoge was especially sensitive.

"Sera! Mission failed! Retreat! Retreaaaaat!!!"

I quickly turned my body around.

"Hiyaaaaaaahhhh!!"

A fierce jumping kick cracked through the dark room. To think she could launch a jumping kick like that without a running start... as expected from Haruna.

"Wait Haruna! I can explain!"

"I have a guy with his naked butt wagging in the air, drooling all over me with night vision goggles while I'm sleeping. You really think anything you say is gonna make me not kick you in the face?!"

"... Yeah, you have a point there."

Haruna twirled through the air before landing on top of Tomonori.

"Ugeh... nnnnn..."

She didn't wake up. Well, I guess that was a relief.

Anyway, I broke out into a run to try and get out of there. But, I ended up stumbling on something.

It was a pile of rolled-up underwear. Crap, I had forgotten to close the drawers.

I really wasn't used to these night vision goggle things, and so this happened...

I threw off some of the underwear that had landed on top of my head and ran out of the room.

"Sera! Sorry! They found me out!"

Sera came out of the front room and took one look at me... before holding her leaf sword over her head.

"I... never... thought... you were this disgusting!!"

She brought her leaf sword down, cutting through my skin and my leotard.

Wait wait wait! Did I have no friends left here?! No, I know! Yuu will surely understand! She'll definitely be on my side...

I took a quick glance at the dining kitchen, and...

Well, Yuu was there. And she seemed to be happily digging into the meat and potato stew that Haruna and Tomonori had made.

Wait, what happened to her sense of "aesthetics"?!

Ah, I see now. That chime I had heard earlier was the sound of the microwave.

Well... mystery solved, I guess... In any case, maybe it was male instinct, but as I got a taste of Sera's Tsubamegaeshi, all I could do was stand there and grip Tomonori's underwear tightly in my fist.



**Chapter 4: Part 7**

Well, anyway, so a bunch of stuff happened, but we ended up safely getting the scroll back. I was now in my own kitchen, working hard with Sera on a meal. The scroll was spread out on a table.

"Ayumu."

"What is it?"

"This recipe does not include eyedrops. Are you sure this is a meat and potato stew recipe?"

"I'm sure."

"Hm, how strange... I can feel no passion in this ingredient list."

"Hey, Sera... why are you so passionate about cooking anyways?"

I asked her that as we waited for our rice noodles to boil, at which point Sera gave me a bit of a lonely look.

"I live by the sword."

"Yeah, I know that much."

I was always getting sliced into ribbons by her sword, after all. My leotard suffered a similar fate this time.

"The sword can protect people... but it cannot bring them joy."

Sera began skillfully peeling the potatoes as she continued talking.

"However, to my knowledge... the only way to bring people happiness with the blade is through cooking."

I see. Sera lived by her sword, so I guess it made sense that she would want to bring happiness to people through her sword. So that's what cooking meant to her.

Dang... now I felt bad for telling her so many times not to cook.

"Also, why did you want to make meat and potato stew?"

"I asked Haruna what gentlemen enjoy eating..."

"Sera is cooking because of a guy? Haha, what a lucky fellow."

"I am cooking this... for you."

"Eh?" I was at a complete loss after hearing her unexpected words.

"When everyone eats my food, they are so overjoyed that they end up fainting, are they not?"

So... from Sera's perspective, she thought that was a show of happiness?

"I am not sure if they are just overwhelmed by their first meal, but they then tend to stop eating my food. However, you are the only person who eats my food every time. Your gluttony is quite disgusting... but having my food eaten admittedly makes me happy."

"You really don't have to go out of your way to make something for someone like me."

"Fufu, despite everything, I am quite thankful to you. For lots of things..."

Sera smiled... and I couldn't help but think about how amazingly cute she looked. For lots of things, huh...?

The meat and potato stew proceeded steadily. I couldn't see what was written on the scroll, but I figured it was fine if I just kept watch and stopped Sera from doing anything weird.

At that point, Haruna made her way over to us.

"So, how's it goin'? Nothing exploded yet, right?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. Go in the living room and wait with Yuu."

"Hey hey hey. Don't you try to leave me out, okay?!"

"If you start cooking, then you'll end up doing everything, right? Let Sera handle it this time."

"As if I care! Just let me do it! Don't act like this after you all went and played a fun game of thief and didn't even tell me!"

"You wanted to join in on that too...?"

"I want to wear a mask and tuxedo sometimes too!"

Thieves don't wear that! Well, maybe the Kaitou Kid from Conan...

"Anyway, go sit down and wait. It'll be ready soon. Please... just this once."

"O-Okay, fine! I guess when you put it like that!"

After I somehow managed to stop Sera from adding in gum syrup and plastic, we finally finished our meat and potato stew.

We brought over this stew to where Haruna and Yuu had been patiently waiting.

It tasted like... nothing I've ever had before... this was Katsushika Hokusai's...

Actually, it was strange. If I were forced to say it... it wasn't really very good.

"Gyah! Yuck!"

Haruna glared at Sera with narrowed, snake-like eyes.

"I... see. This is the first time I have heard such words from someone who has tasted my cooking. Perhaps I really should have added in the carbonic acid..."

I guess Sera's cooking was more a matter of life or death with a ten percent survival rate, so it usually didn't come down to the question of whether it was tasty or not.

**Seconds please.**

"Yuu, you..."

I also wolfed down this mediocre meat and potato stew and held out my bowl at Sera. "Seconds please," I said. I saw Sera's jade-colored eyes began to water, and she dabbed her eyes with one long, porcelain finger.

"This is... also the first time I have heard such words from someone who has tasted my cooking."

**I like meat and potato stew.**

"It's pretty blech, but really good for something you made. So I'll have seconds too."

"Thank you... very much."

Like this, Sera successfully cooked the first meal in her life.

A meal that would bring joy to others.

Sera could use this as a jumping off point to keep on cooking real things, and even if she fails a few times, she would slowly improve. Flat out forbidding her from trying wouldn't actually give her a chance to learn, after all.

"Ayumu, I also tried making some miso soup."

"Oh, really? Cool. I guess if you want to learn how to cook, you gotta start with the basics of the basics."

"I went out with it and used up three mythril swords. Please try it."

Mythril... myth... miss... miso... wait, seriously?! She hasn't improved at all!

"Okay, I changed my mind. You seriously should stop cooking. Well, I guess if someone was there to supervise you it'd be okay, but..."

In the end, would Sera ever be able to cook something that would bring joy to others?

That was the last wisp of a complaint running through my head as I sipped at this thing she had called "miso soup."

**Chapter 4: Part 8**

Ahh, that was a pretty rough day. Just because I'm a zombie doesn't mean you can do whatever you want to me, ugh...

Tomonori was sitting on the defense's side, and she banged her hand onto the desk.

"See?! Aikawa's already been punished! Yeah, sure he might be guilty of some stuff, but he got shot with three hundred bamboo spears, so I think that's enough!"

"Certainly... if there really were three hundred spears involved then I can't imagine punishing him more..."

Mihara leaned forwards in the jury box. She had always been convinced of my guilt, but now she seemed a bit unsure.

"Umm... what is Dragon Magazine...?"

Hiramatsu raised a hand, looking rather apologetic.

"It's a magazine put out by Fushimi Books! All the good boys and girls already know that, right?!"



The presiding judge Haruna howled at her, and Hiramatsu seemed to curl into a ball. "Sorry..." she let out weakly.

"Around that time, Fushimi Books was celebrating the publication of its three hundredth issue."

"But even then, it's way too cruel to shoot him with three hundred bamboo spears to celebrate!"

Tomonori pointed a finger swiftly at Sera. I could also start seeing a hint of pity appearing in the eyes of the jury as they looked at me.

*Bang bang!* The judge tried to restore order within the courtroom, which had now become quite noisy.

"Okay, I sentence Ayumu to being stabbed by three hundred more bamboo spears."

What? This judge... she really had no intention of finding me not guilty, did she?

**That would just be too brutal.**

The flow of the trial had completely changed. Tomonori raised her hand, seeming like she was about to launch a flurry of arguments, but Sera spoke first, almost as if she wanted to cut Tomonori off.

"I see... well then, I will present testimony. I will establish proof that this man once deliberately committed sexual harassment."

When things weren't going your way, you should give up the fight and just change the topic.

Sera had been chased into a corner, but for some reason she was still brimming with confidence... it sent a shiver down my spine.

Nothing ever comes of war. Good evening. This is Aikawa Ayumu.

**Too bad.**

"There's always the next one. Would you accompany me to just one more?"

War was filled with winners and losers, each with their own reasons for fighting.

**It isn't at this one either.**

"Yes... that is true. I understand. Let's go home."

The winner would receive a prize, while the loser would receive a lesson.

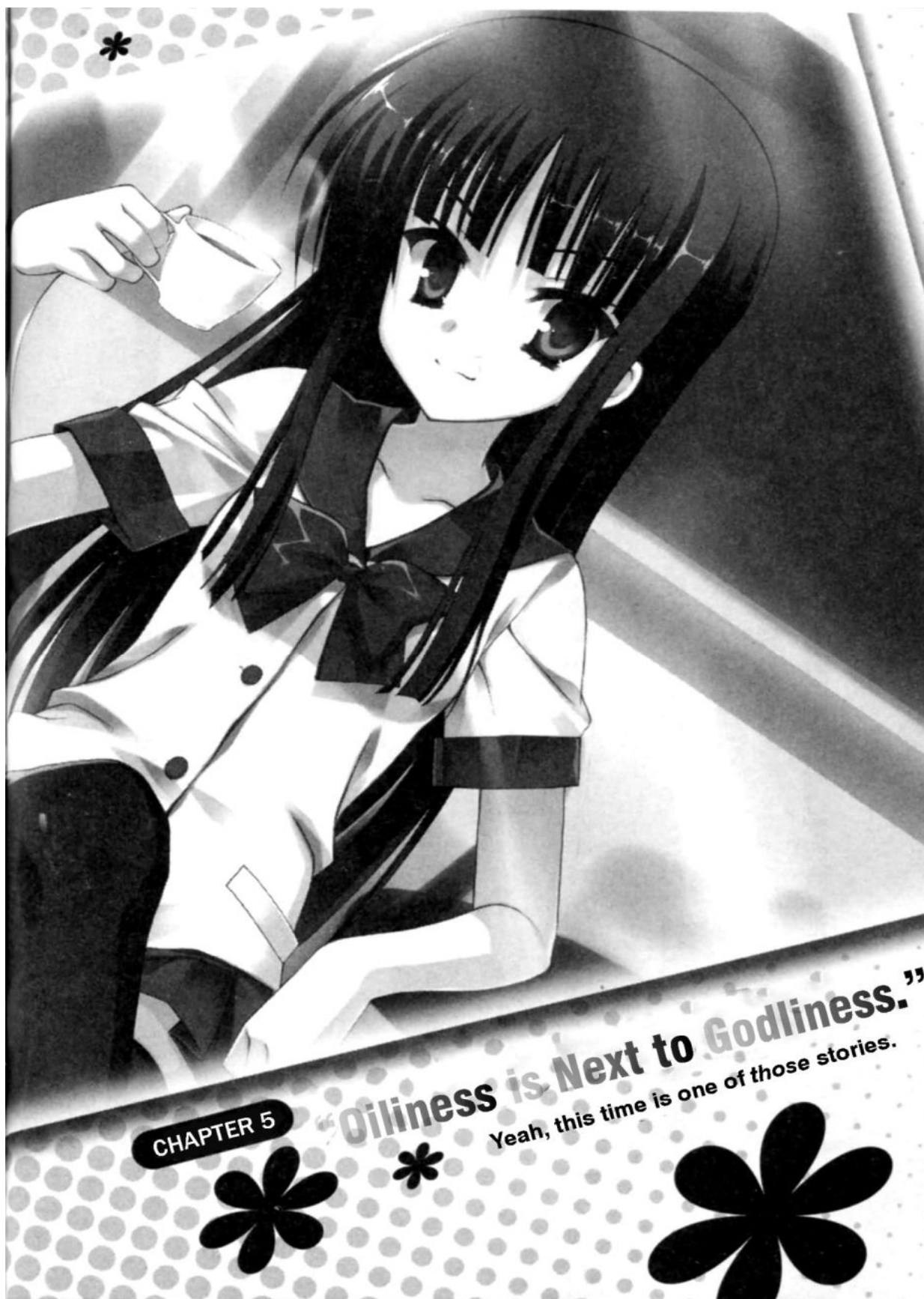
"But, not being able to find it just makes me want it all the more."

**Perhaps someone has one already and can give some to us.**

But... there were always innocent bystanders who also suffered.

Nothing ever comes of war.





**Chapter 5 – Slime Makes Right****Chapter 5: Part 1**

It was a certain cold, winter Sunday after the school festival.

I was a self-proclaimed convenience store fanatic, so I was wandering around the neighborhood convenience stores, window shopping. I was in the midst of deciding whether I wanted to buy some oden, when I saw someone I didn't expect to see.

She had a mature air about her and long, beautiful hair. Her slender body was covered in an elegant long coat.

Her eyes were sharp, and her movements were beautifully graceful. Her face just exuded refinement, and she stood in stark contrast to the convenience store she was right next to.

Her name was Sarasvati. She went to the same school as I did and was actually a kind of monster known as a vampire ninja.

She also seemed to notice my presence.

"Hm? I thought I caught a whiff of garbage, and here I find my garbage darling standing right in front of me. What perfect timing."

Her sharp eyes pierced me like daggers, and she beckoned me over with a finger.

"Yo, Saras. What's up? What are you doing in a place like this?"

"Hm? Is there something strange about me visiting a convenience store?"

"Yeah, I'd expect to see you more in a fancy Japanese restaurant getting a seven-course dinner."

"That almost sounds like a compliment, but I sense some ridicule in those words. Please go die."

"It's not good to jump to 'death' five seconds into a conversation... anyways, what are you doing here?"

"Hm. We have a test soon, yes? I was going to study all night, so I wanted to stock up on some late-night snacks in preparation."

Saras crossed her arms and began glaring at some cup ramen.

"Cup ramen? You? Wow, that's such a mismatch."

I chuckled, but then Saras sent her elbow right into my stomach. I'm a zombie, so I felt no pain. However, I still lost my breath, and it was pretty uncomfortable. Saras paid me no mind as I began to cough violently and just continued talking without a care in the world.

"These things are what high schoolers usually eat for late night snacks, correct? I was thinking of trying some tonight."

"I see. You want some food not as a vampire ninja but as a high school student. It's pretty impressive how dedicated you are."

"However, there is a problem. I am not very familiar with such low-brow items like this. My darling, will you please share your wisdom with me?"

"Yeah, sure. I mean, you did help out a lot at the school festival."

Saras was one of the vampire ninja commanders, but she also had a lot of influence at school. This means that she ended up helping me out both with monster extermination and events at school. I guess you could say I was one of her frequent customers.

"An ordinary person like you must know quite a lot about these miscellanea."



"Certainly, to the uninitiated these might all look the same, but... how about this here?"

I really wanted to help Saras out to pay her back for all she's done, and I recommended a new limited-edition product. This was a super rare item that would only be sold today, called "Hiraga Gennai would be super surprised! Seafood Udon."<sup>1</sup> Maybe Japanese people just had no self-control when it came to limited edition products, but the one I picked up was the last one in stock.

"Udon, hm? Okay. You seem to understand my mood well. I will try this."

"Ahh, I'm glad I could be of some use."

Saras seemed quite pleased but then seemed to feel a bit embarrassed and quickly averted her gaze.

Who could've expected that this little meeting would be the trigger of a horrendous series of events?

---

<sup>1</sup> Hiraga Gennai is a Japanese pharmacologist that lived during the 18th Century.



**Chapter 5: Part 2**

After I got back home, I headed straight for the living room instead of my own room. My body was chilled, so I wanted to dive right under the kotatsu and relax with the big plasma television in there. In the living room, I found a pretty girl who was letting out a long, sad sigh.

"Sera, what's wrong? You're sighing."

I got under the kotatsu and spoke up.

The beautiful girl in front of me had her glistening long hair tied up into a ponytail. It was honestly a bit strange to be calling her a "girl". She wasn't just "cute" but was "beautiful" and now that beautiful girl had a look of sorrow on her face.

"Ahh, it's Ayumu..." *Sigh.*

Had something really awful happened while I wasn't looking? I really didn't know what to say, and while I tried to figure out how Sera was feeling, I heard two taps on the desk.

When I looked to the side, I saw another pretty girl with silver hair looking at me with emotionless eyes.

She was dressed in a set of western armor, presenting a sight that you wouldn't have seen even in the heyday of plate armor. But that was also because Yuu was a girl of unprecedented beauty.

Her skin was smooth and pale, almost to the point of being see-through. Her eyes were blue and seemed to suck you in. Every part of her was just so lovable.

There was a single torn-off memo now on the table. And this was written on that memo:

**She does not want to give up.**

"Give up? Give up on what?"

A question mark appeared above my head. I really didn't know what she was talking about.

"Well, there was supposed to be a limited edition cup udon on sale today..."

Sera's voice rang with sadness, like a light rain that had just begun to fall.

"Ahh, that seafood udon? The Hiraga Gennai thing..."

I gave a pretty indifferent response, but Sera's jade eyes snapped wide open.

"Do you know of it? D-Don't tell me, Ayumu, did you buy it?!"

Sera banged on the table and stood up. She came right up to me, and my eyes became glued to not her pretty face, but the chest that lay right below it. I can see down your shirt, you know...

"N-No... I didn't buy it."

"... As always, you are completely useless. In MTG terms, you would be a scaled worm."

"Don't underestimate the scaled worm. Also... ah, I guess Saras ended up buying the last one. I recommended it to her."

"Why did you not buy it for me instead?!"

Stop yelling. It's not like I had any way of knowing you wanted something like that. But a timid person like me wouldn't be able to say that even if my mouth was close to tearing near the seams. Well, granted, I got the feeling that someone was going to tear my mouth whether I said it or not...

**Sera has looked for it at thirty stores already but has not succeeded.**

"That sounds pretty rough." I looked at Sera with pity in my eyes.

"I apologize. I seem to have lost my composure."

Sera looked quite sorrowful as she took in a deep breath and pulled her body back.

"Geez, why exactly do you want that cup udon so badly? I could understand if this was Yuu, but..."

I took a glance at the emotionless necromancer who was next to me.

Yuu always looked like an expressionless doll. That made her all the cuter.

"They say that even Hiraga Gennai would be surprised by this udon. Does that not make you intensely curious?"

"That's why?! Well, okay, I admit I have no idea why they picked Hiraga Gennai out of all people..."

"Hiraga Gennai was born in Sanuki, in Kagawa Prefecture."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Sanuki is famous for its udon.

"I see... you sure know a lot about him."

"Yes. I like him just as much as Ooka Echizen.<sup>2</sup> So I really wanted to try this udon... but to think it would be so difficult to acquire this item..."

In other words, Sera was a big fan of Hiraga Gennai, and she was completely taken in by the tagline 'Hiraga Gennai would be super surprised!' on the package. That led us to this situation. Seeing this side of Sera admittedly made me chuckle a bit.

"Well, that's just bad timing I guess. You should've told me... I know when all the convenience stores in the neighborhood would've gotten that udon in stock."

"If it had been anybody other than Saras who bought it..."

Sera and Saras were both vampire ninjas, so you might think Sera could just ask Saras nicely for the udon. But Sera was Saras's subordinate, so she was the one who got the orders, not the one who gave them. It was hard for her to go to Saras and ask her to hand over the udon.

Well, guess I have to pitch in here and do my part.

---

<sup>2</sup> Another name for Ooka Tadasuke, a Japanese samurai.

I kept an eye on the frustrated look on Sera's face and thought over what to do before fishing out my cell phone.

*Ringggg... ringgg... click.*

"Do not call me so suddenly, you irritating darling. Are you looking to pick a fight with me?"

That's the first thing she said to me after picking up the phone. If I didn't know she was a tsundere, I would've been terrified and wouldn't have been able to say anything, but I was already used to this.

"Hey, I need to ask you something. Did you eat that udon you bought earlier?"

"Are you a moron? I bought it to eat late tonight."

"That's good. Sorry, but could you let me have the udon? Sera said she really wanted a taste of it..."

Saras had sounded like she was in a bad mood, but now her mood was dyed completely black. She spoke as if she was the leader of some evil organization.

"I see... I understand your situation. Please relay the following message to Seraphim. If she wants this, she should come and battle me for it. That is all."

You really don't have to get this pissy about it, but I obediently relayed the message to Sera.

"And that's what she said."

"If she is offering a battle for that udon, then I could wish for nothing better."

Sera at that moment looked just as majestically calm as she always did.

"Ohh! I overheard what's going on! Fu fu fu."

A girl sporting shoulder length chestnut hair came over. A little tuft of hair was peeking up out the top of her head in what was called an "ahoge." Ahoges were quite popular in certain circles.

Anyway, this was our house's resident troublemaker, the masou shoujo Haruna. Whenever she got involved, the situation always went to hell.

Her sparkling, mischievous eyes looked right at me.

"I heard there was gonna be a battle! Just leave it to me!"

Where's that migraine medication when you need it...

**Chapter 5: Part 3**

Well, things had taken an inexplicable turn for the strange. I was now walking under the cold winter sky without a scarf or gloves, heading for a graveyard that (judging from the atmosphere) was already quite chilly.

We walked past the lines of graves and grave markers, heading for a large space on the other side. There was a huge tree there which must've been centuries old. Wait, exactly why did we have to do this thing outside on such a cold day?

Sera and Saras, two long-haired beauties, were standing right next to a grave and glaring at each other.

Haruna was also there, holding what seemed to be a number of clothing rods. You know, the things you hang clothes on. By the way, Yuu wasn't even here. She was probably still comfortably sitting under the kotatsu right now.

"Ah, a bit more to the right. Go over to that tree over there!"

This arrogant little girl threw an order at me as her ahoge jumped from side to side, and I reluctantly walked towards the big tree.

All the leaves had already withered away, and the tree just stood there looking very lonely. This was one of the best moon-watching spots for a zombie like me.



The space itself was very wide, wide to the point where I could see myself playing a game of dodgeball here.

"Okay, it's the javelin competition! Of course, we're gonna aim for Ayumu. Round one, start!"

What the hell?! But, I spent so long doubting my ears that before I had a chance to say something in my defense, Haruna had already handed Sera and Saras their clothing rods.

In the next instant, a clothing rod whose end had been sharpened to a point tore through the night air. I heard a sharp sound of wind as it grazed my ear and flew past me.

"Wait! What the hell is this?! Aren't you supposed to be seeing who can throw those things the farthest?!"

I had no idea if they were listening to my shouting or not... no, clearly they were not.

Another rod was coming right at my forehead, so in true Matrix fashion I bent my body completely backwards and somehow managed to avoid it.

"Okay, both of you missed!"

*Phew...* looked like I managed to survive. Ugh, that Haruna was going overboard again. For the love of God, someone please go and tell Haruna how a javelin competition actually works...

"Let's start round two!"

They were going again?! Were they going to just keep throwing until someone hit me?!

"Wait!" I made a mad dash for Haruna and the others.

Sera scowled, holding her rod in one hand.

"What's the problem?"

"A-Ahh, you don't know? Umm, well, the javelin competition is now over."

Sera and Saras both gave me quite vampire-ish glares as their faces warped in anger. They clearly looked annoyed at what I was saying.

"Well then, who won this match then?"

Saras shrugged.

"Well..." I took a look around at everyone present. Hm? Why did everyone look so dissatisfied?

"Maybe we need... a judge? Haruna, who won?"

Haruna clasped her hands together and seemed to be thinking hard. Her ahoge bounced from side to side. Soon, that ahoge suddenly stood straight on end, and she gave us a sparkling smile.

"The leaf woman!"

Okay, I guess Sera won... clap clap clap.

"Is this not unfair? You all live under the same roof, so I accuse you of favoritism."

Saras did bring up a good point there. I would probably give preference to Sera as well.

"Maybe we really should have a second round of javelin..."

"L-Let's try some other kind of contest. Umm... ummmmm..."

I racked my brains for a solution, when another girl came running.

"Yooo, Aikawa~~! I heard you guys were competing or something!"

It was a short-haired girl. She was quite energetic, but unlike Haruna she was also quite tomboyish. Her name was Tomonori, and she gave us a smile.

She liked sports and was also obsessed with convenience stores like me. She was an idiot that held the hearts of both the boys and the girls at our school.

Yeah, I guess Tomonori would be someone who would really like competitions like this. I wonder how she actually sniffed us out?

"Yo, Tomonori. Perfect timing."

"Don't call me Tomonori! I'm a girl, okay?!"

I explained the situation to Tomonori, how we just finished our javelin competition and were now trying to figure out what to do next. She didn't even pretend to think about it, but gave an instant, energetic answer.

"Okay! Let's have a race! There's this place that the vampire ninjas just built for training!"

Yes, she was also a vampire ninja like Sera and Saras, and since this was a battle between two vampire ninjas, I felt fine about leaving the rest to another vampire ninja like Tomonori.

Well, I guess I'll just take my leave here. Gotta get home and-

"Shit darling. Exactly where do you think you're going?"

Saras stopped me.

Sera and Haruna were already following behind Tomonori. Oh, were they moving everything somewhere else already?

"I'm going home. I'll leave the rest Tomonori and Haruna."

"Do you not think you have a duty to see this contest through to an end?"

"Not really... actually, why are you competing in the first place? You could've just handed over the udon. It's not like you really cared too much about the udon when you bought it."

"Do you not understand why I instigated this battle?"

"Yeah, not a clue."

"It is because my lovely bitter-but-not-really-bitter-okay-maybe-a-bit-bitter darling has prioritized Seraphim over me. I felt my chest ready to burst from agony when I learned of this. In other words, I am jealous."

Is that why she had sounded a bit moody on the phone?

"No, it's not like I prioritized her over you or anything..."

"Well then, allow me to ask a question, my good-for-nothing darling. Do you sincerely think of me more than you think of Seraphim?"

"Even if you ask me to choose like that..."

How was I supposed to answer that question? I stared up at the sky, watching my breath cloud up above me like the smoke from a steam engine.

What should I do...?

"I admit I do not dislike that troubled expression of yours."

Saras gave me a beautiful chuckle. She looked so cute when she did that, maybe it was because she was just so different from how she usually acted. Looking at Saras, I felt myself blush a bit before looking in Sera's direction with a pout on my face.

Well... if I was the reason this little battle broke out, then I guess I had to stick it through to the end. Geez...

Well, I'd be happy as long as we were going somewhere warmer.

**Chapter 5: Part 4**

And so, we soon found ourselves on the roof of a really tall building. The wind wildly whooshed past us, and I trembled from the cold.

To think we would be able to find somewhere even colder than the graveyard in this city... there wasn't even a railing on this roof, and just looking over the edge filled me with a nauseous sense of vertigo. I really don't think we should be on this roof right now.

I was a bit worried about exactly how high we were right now when Tomonori offered up an explanation.

"Welcome to the 74-meter-tall 100-meter steel railing dash!"

That sounded insanely, insanely familiar, that thing she just said!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to a similar event in Kaiji.





There were two steel beams leading from the top of this roof to the top of an adjacent roof. The frames were around the width of a human foot. I guess they were supposed to use those beams as a balance beam of sorts to get across.

"When it comes to speed, I will not lose."

Sera's jade-colored eyes were filled with the utmost confidence.

"Hmm, Seraphim. Has there ever been a time when you have been able to defeat me?"

Saras gave Sera a bold smile, and both of them headed for the starting line.

Honestly, did neither of them feel even the least bit cold? Ugh, it was so damn cold...

"Okay... start!"

At Haruna's signal, both of them mounted their steel beams.

If a normal person were to try something like this, they'd be super nervous, right? But these were ninjas who were used to running across rooftops, so...

Just as I had expected, the two of them didn't waver in the slightest in the harsh wind and just calmly ran across like pro circus acrobats.

"By the way, those railings will send out electric jolts if they touch them with their hands!"

That's pretty tough. It'd be hard to not squat down and grab onto the railing in a wind like this.

"The electric jolts go to Ayumu, of course!"

Haruna's ahoge jumped from side to side in the wind as she said that with a happy smile on her face

"Why? Hey, why is that?"

Haruna and Tomonori both ignored my questioning stare. These bastards...

Saras and Sera both looked at each other. And then...

"Oh my, it seems my feet have slipped."

Saras bent down and touched the railing. It was obviously on purpose.

Ahh-h-h-h I g-g-g-guess-s-s-s-s it-t-t-t was-s-s h-h-h-hard not-t-t to t-t-t-touch the rail-l-l-ling in a s-s-s-s-spot-t-t-t l-l-l-l-like this-s-s-s-s.

"The wind is quite strong today, isn't it?"

Sera didn't seem to want to move until the wind settled down, or she just wanted to shock me. Either way, she bent down and just held onto the railing. Well, no, it was clearly the latter reason.

Seeing Sera do that, Saras leapt into a full sprint. Sera... seemed to still just want to shock me with electricity.

But Sera did seem to have an advantage in speed, and she began to close the gap between her and Saras. And then... well, she *really* seemed to want to shock me.

Anybody watching could clearly see that this was the reason for Sera's defeat. In the end, Saras won the race.

"I was careless." Sera ground her teeth in frustration.

"Way too careless! Way way way too careless!"

"Seraphim, I understand how you may feel."

Saras nodded again and again.

"I wanna try too!"

Haruna raised her hand. What a huge genius she must be to think that crossing iron rails like this would be fun.

"Okay! Let's race then!"

Tomonori and Haruna had probably been itching to do this from the start. They didn't even wait for anybody's signal and just began dashing across the iron rails.

H-Hey, they just want to shock me too, right?! Dammit!

"Stop it you two! There's only one way this can end, you know?! The future is already within our grasp!"<sup>2</sup>

They didn't seem to pay my laments any heed, and simply continued running across the iron beams.

"Well, it does seem like this is my victory."

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<sup>2</sup> The last line is a reference to the Kaiji opening.

"Yes. We are now tied at one victory each."

"Hm? ... Fufu, Seraphim. It seems you have grown quite impertinent. Well, have it your way then."

Now that she mentioned it, I guess Sera *did* win the javelin competition.

It looked like we were taking this battle into a third round.

I looked up at the night sky as electricity ran through my body.

**Chapter 5: Part 5**

Maybe my complaints about the cold had finally gotten through, but we decided to hold the next round in my house.

The sound of laughter came from a variety show on the television, while the table was laid out with oranges and hot tea.

Sitting under a kotatsu surrounded by girls was enough to seriously warm my heart. This would be supreme bliss if I hadn't gotten poles thrown at me or electricity run through me.

I couldn't count on Tomonori or Haruna anymore. Instead, I would leave it to our lovable necromancer, whose favorite motto might as well have been "peace and tranquility."

**The third round will be a portrait contest.**

Yuu ended up picking an extremely normal, safe contest for the third round. Yuu, you're so unbelievably understanding...

"Who are we painting?"

Sera looked at Yuu seriously, her sketchbook in hand.

**Ayumu.**

"Me again?"

**Do not worry. You will not be shocked by electricity.**

Well, I guess I could be their model. Standing still was a zombie specialty after all.

"Get out into the hall and make a pose. I'm gonna draw you too."

"Umm, this is a portrait contest, right? So you only need to draw my face."

"Shut up and go make a good pose!"

**I will also draw.**

"Okay, me too!"

It seemed that everyone was going to draw me. It really wasn't clear who was competing against whom anymore...



Anyway, I was in the weaker position here, so I obediently went out into the hallway and put my right hand on my hips. It was a "resting" pose, similar to how I would stand in a line.

It seemed that Haruna wasn't all too pleased with my choice though...

"Just sit down already."

She threw another command at me. I let out a resigned sigh before plopping myself down onto the cold floor.

"You're a bit hard to draw like that, so could ya spread out your legs a bit?"

Tomonori said that, and I spread out my legs a bit.

"Put your heel on the top of your head."

How was I supposed to do that?! But I humbly obeyed Sera, and desperately forced my right foot's heel onto my head. What kind of weird yoga class was this supposed to be...? Ugh...

"Now move your left elbow to touch the toes on that foot."

Elbow? I tried to carry out Saras's orders... but ugh, this was impossible. Just impossible.

"Your hand is hard to draw. Hide the fingers."

While I'm like this?! Ugh... gngngngggg...

"How disgusting. Turn the other way please."

Sera glared at me, so I took my foot off from my head and began to turn around.

"Hey! Don't move that foot! I'm drawing that part right now!"

"Turn around. Now please."

"Don't move!"

"Aikawa, don't close your legs!"

"Ugh, dammit! What the hell do you want me to do?!"

It seemed that twisting my body this way and that way worked out though. Everyone soon successfully completed their portraits.

Let's get to it and take a look at what everyone drew then.

Haruna seemed to have drawn a dot. Maybe when she looked at me all she saw was a dot? I asked her about it, and she said she tried to draw everything in a micron-sized space. She said that the picture would totally look right under a microscope or something... wow, what a genius...

For some reason, Tomonori drew me wearing a baseball cap and with flames coming out of my eyes. What kind of weird sports anime character was *that* supposed to be?

Yuu's drawing was really good. But hmm... why was my hair all slicked back? Wait, was she thinking about Steven Segal again?!

Now we got to the two portraits which really mattered. First up was Saras...

"It's a cat."

She drew a cat! And it was a calico cat! I wouldn't know if it was a Persian cat or a Chinchilla cat, but this was the first time I've seen someone draw a long-haired cat! Also...

"Was all that crazy posing I did a waste?!"

I hit the table with my fist, but Saras didn't seem to pay me any mind and just looked extremely satisfied with her drawing. Sera took a glance at Saras before showing me her sketchbook.

"I properly drew you."

Last but not least... ew! It looked like I had eight heads and six noses! This was gross! Exactly how big did she think my face was?! This was just really gross! What exactly happened to my joints and stuff?! Seriously, think a bit more about using the proper dimensions! Dozens and dozens of comments like this filled my head.

To think that Sera would be such an awful artist... I guess cooking wasn't her only weak point.

"A perfect likeness of Ayumu, wouldn't you say?"

"It looks more like Neo Exdeath!"

"Ahahahaha!"

Strangely, the person who ended up bursting out laughing at Sera's drawing was Saras.

Haruna and Tomonori both had somewhat mocking smiles on their faces, but Saras was laughing out of pure, simple amusement. This must've been the first time I've seen Saras like this, so all I could do was stand there dumbfounded.

"Ahh, that's just too strange..."

Saras actually had tears in her eyes as she looked at Sera's sketch. She seemed to set off a chain reaction, and soon everyone was laughing together.

"D-Do not make fun of me! ... This is my victory, yes?"

"I hardly think so."

Saras couldn't seem to let Sera get away with saying that, and responded through her laughter.

**There is no winner.**

Everyone nodded. It was a unanimous decision.

"You are saying that my portrait loses to *this*?"

Saras snorted. Yeah, it was true that Saras's drawing was way better than Sera's. But...

"Well, it wasn't a cat-drawing contest though."

Saras shut up when she heard Tomonori's all-too-correct opinion. She seemed a bit shocked, probably since Tomonori was the last person on earth she might've expected to corner her like this.

"Why exactly did you draw a cat in the first place?"

"I am good at drawing cats."

Ahh, I can see that. Everyone had something they were good at that they wanted to show others.

"Well, looks like this is a tie!"

Yeah, looks like it. Nobody else seemed to have any objections either.

But now the score was still one to one, with one tie. We couldn't really crown a winner like this.

Well, looks like I have no choice here. I raised a hand and everyone else fell silent.

"Well, allow me to suggest a final competition then. How about we break this tie with a game of hardcore Yagli Gures?"

"Yagli Gures?"

Saras gave me a puzzled look. Good, good. Just don't ask any questions and accept it already. Once you two go into battle mode you'll never quit until a winner is decided, right? Fu fu fu.

"Gross."

I felt myself stiffen in terror at Sera's all-out verbal attack. Could it really be that she knew what Yagli Gures was...?

"The leaf woman knows what it is?"

Sera shook her head at Haruna's question.

"No, I was simply stating the fact that Ayumu himself is gross."

That's a relief... wait, no it isn't! That's pretty horrible!

"Yagli Gures is this thing where you take olive oil and-"

Tomonori loved dressings and oils almost as much as she loved sports, so she seemed to know about this.

"Well, it's the national sport of Turkey, actually. So it's not anything strange."

Before Tomonori could get too deep in her explanation, I butt in and tried desperately to leave them with a more positive image of the sport.

"In that case, I have no complaints."

"Whatever the contest, I do not mind."

*Exactly. As. Planned!*

The little inner me pumped his arms as I stared at Sera's voluptuous body. She was like an embodiment of female charm and sexuality.

But there was someone who wasn't very happy with my staring, and that person was... not Sera, but Saras.



Saras scowled and pushed her arms against her chest before giving me a look like she was the sinister head of an evil government office or something.

"Time is wasting. This will probably become our last battle. So, Seraphim, let us decide on a penalty for the loser."

"Penalty, you say?"

"Just having a winner would make for quite a boring game. And I would not receive anything for winning either. What do you say?"

"Understood. I am prepared for any penalty."

Something about Sera's unfazed expression probably ticked Saras off because she came up with a terrifying idea.

"Hmm... well then, the loser must kiss Orito."

A wave of shock ran through our living room, which had been all smiles up until a second ago.

Orito was one of my classmates, and he liked chasing skirts so much that he kept a database in his head of all the profiles of all the girls at our school, a database which he continuously updated. I hope that's enough to convince you; he was insanely annoying.

Now the loser would have to kiss him. I really don't think I would ever want to win a package of cup udon so much that I'd risk having to do that.

Also, for the vampire ninjas, kisses held special significance. A kiss was a symbol of marriage. So the person who lost this competition would become Orito's wife.

There was no way Sera would agree to these terms. Saras was probably counting on that.

"Understood."

But Sera accepted this penalty with a serious look on her face.

**Will you be okay?**

Yuu seemed worried.

"A-Are you sure about that?! You're gonna do it?! That's like... harps and little Cupids flying all over the place! Real serious stuff!"

Tomonori was in a panic. She seemed to understand how serious this was.

Only Haruna, who couldn't care less about what happened to other people, seemed completely unshaken by the penalty.

"Okay okay, so whoever loses gets the penalty, and if Ayumu goes off and sexually harasses someone, he gets the penalty too!"

"Understood."

"I could not ask for anything more."

"Wait, why is my name in there too?! You put me into that javelin match and that steel beam race, and now this too?! Also, stop betting your lives on a game when you don't even know the rules yet!"

Hi. I'm the guy who just gets ignored no matter what he does. Name's Aikawa Ayumu. Nice to meet you. God dammit...

"Sounds like fun! Okay, let's meet at my place. I have a whole drum can of olive oil, so I'll go first and get things ready!"

"I'm coming too~~."

Saras (who didn't look very happy), Haruna, and Tomonori all got out from under the kotatsu and left the room.

I was left with Sera who still looked perfectly calm. I spoke up in a low voice.

"Exactly what are you playing at here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're getting a bit too deep into this, aren't you?"

"Do I really look like an impulsive person to you? As always, your eyes need checking."

*Tap tap.* Yuu tapped on the desk.

**It seems impulsive to me as well. Please explain yourself.**

Seeing Yuu's memo, Sera let out a deep sigh.

"This is no longer about Hiraga Gennai. Until now, I have never been able to match Saras in any area. As a vampire ninja, Saras is my commander, and I have become accustomed to always looking at her back, wishing I could catch up and be more like her. As a person, Saras is my friend..."

At that point, Sera fell silent. She seemed to be searching hard for her next words, then she looked me straight in the eye.

"And she is my rival."

Saras was not her rival as a vampire ninja, but as a person. I didn't really know what she meant, but before I could think about it too much Sera shook her head, her cheeks slightly red.

"I-In any case, no matter what the contest, I will not run. I will become her equal."

After finishing with that, Sera also slipped out from the kotatsu.

W-What exactly was going on? I have no idea.

But Yuu seemed to understand how I felt and left a single memo before she followed after Sera.

**Seraphim has always felt beneath Sarasvati. However, she has found a way to be Sarasvati's equal in one matter. That matter is Ayumu.**

...Me? Ugh, dammit! I still have no idea what's going on!

**Chapter 5: Part 6**

We soon found ourselves in the courtyard of the apartment building where lots of vampire ninjas lived.

It was a high-class brick building. Tomonori's room was the innermost room on the first floor, and if you went out on the veranda of that room, you could see a spacious green lawn spread out on all sides in front of you.

I could imagine that they used this space for barbeques, or inflatable pools, or games of catch. For a sports-addicted outdoors person like Tomonori, this courtyard was probably indispensable.

Anyway, I suppose I should explain. Yagli Gures is-

**Yagli Gures is Turkey's national sport. It is a traditional combat sport with over six hundred and fifty years of history where the combatants cover their bodies in olive oil before fighting.**

After hearing Yuu's explanation, Sera and Saras both pierced me with deadly glares.

Both of them were wearing snug female wrestling uniforms. Saras was slender and looked quite the part, but when Sera wore that uniform with her good style...

With her big and bouncy good style... you could just feel huge waves of sexiness coming off of her.

"To make it simple, we can just call it 'oil wrestling'!"

It seemed that Haruna now completely understood what was going on after hearing Tomonori's explanation.

"Ayumu."

"What is it, Haruna?"

"You. Are. The. Worst! You eroterrorist!"

"Don't start randomly sticking 'of Joytoy' after my name."<sup>1</sup>

The two competitors came back over under this cold night's sky after having covered their bodies in olive oil. They weren't complaining, but those eyes of theirs really were piercing daggers into my skull.

But, just as I had foreseen, neither of them tried to stop this.

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to the model Yinling of Joytoy, whose published autobiography is titled "LOVE ERO-Terrorism."



**Chapter 5: Part 7**

It was after school on the next day. The evening sun shone on a quiet classroom, and I had my hands on my classmate Orito's shoulders. I held my breath for a moment and gave him a serious look.

"And that's what happened."

"... I understand the situation you're in, but doesn't it seem like I'm also randomly getting punished here...?"

The corners of my spiky-haired friend's mouth twitched as he gave a most appropriate opinion.

"Well uhh... just please. Think of this as saving my life. If I don't do this they might kill me."

"No, but seriously, exactly why do I *have to* kiss Aikawa-"

Of course I didn't expect to convince him. So instead, I didn't let him finish.

"Sorry." I whispered that one word and quickly stole his lips.



I could almost feel little pink cupids with little pink hearts flying around everywhere in the background.

Tomonori, who was acting as our official witness, flushed a deep red. Confirming that she had seen, I quickly wiped my mouth with my shirt sleeve. Orito stood there with his cheeks tinged red.

"Y-You might've taken my lips, but don't think you've taken my heart!"

... What a gross idiot.

The moral of the story today: whether it's sexual harassment or not is ultimately the girl's decision.

**Chapter 5: Part 8**

"Your Honor, I would like to call our next witness."

I guess the witness for this story would be Saras...

"Witness, step forward~~..."

Haruna's motivation was in free fall right now. And ultimately, the person who sat in the witness chair was none other than a certain juror...

"Y-You see... Aikawa... he stole my first kiss..."

It was a spiky-haired bespectacled guy.

"Why is it you?!"

I screamed at him causing Orito to cover his face with his hands.

"I'm the person who got kissed during this incident."

"Aikawa. Did you really...? With Orito...?"

Anderson-kun, the ever-so-handsome gentleman, gave me a painful look.

"Well, that was the penalty. It's not like I wanted to. Why does it feel like I'm being accused of sexually harassing him too?"

I threw my arms around my head. Orito looked at me with a serious expression...

"I sensed no reluctance in Aikawa's lips."

"Stop it with the completely false testimony!"

My yelling seemed to be falling on deaf ears, and a very awkward air drifted around the A/V room. Dammit, it did seem like Orito was a more effective witness than Saras would've been. Just hearing the words "kissing Orito" filled me with a profound sense of disgust.

"That's sooo gross." Mihara's disgust was palpable.

"Also, please do not forget the series of events that led to this particular penalty."

**Why did you decide to choose Yagli Gures?**

When Yuu asked me that, it made it very difficult for me to lie...

"I wanted to see two pretty girls slicked up with oil grappling with each other."

And so, I finally confessed that I had been thinking dirty thoughts.

"So now, there can be no doubt that this was an act of sexual harassment."

*Bang bang.*

"The issue is now settled! The defense may now present her final argument."

Haruna banged on her desk. I could tell she thought the trial had already been decided.

"...I don't think I've got anything left to say."

Tomonori hung her head in frustration. Earlier she had been expecting to win so it's no wonder she was really depressed right now.

"Well then, we shall proceed to judgment."

Haruna looked pleased. The entire A/V room fell into silence. But in the midst of that silence rose a voice.

"... Wait please!" A juror with pigtails raised her hand.

"Hiramatsu." Anderson-kun, who was sitting right next to her, called her name out in surprise.

"... Certainly... if you look at the testimony up until now... Aikawa-kun is a bit perverted... but! I'm sure... everyone... everyone's also been helped by his kindness... I think."

Hiramatsu seemed to be putting every ounce of her courage into her words.

"I wonder..." Mihara seemed to have lost all her energy after hearing about my kiss with Orito.

"As if that's possible! He's just too gross."

*Bang bang. Bang bang.* Haruna yelled that out.

**I have been helped.**

Yuu's memo once again made the A/V room fall into silence. Everyone seemed to be thinking back on something with complicated expressions on their faces.

"Okay, it's the final argument! I summon Hiramatsu Taeko as my witness! Attack now!"

"A-Attack...?"

Hiramatsu sat in the witness's chair and cast her eyes downwards.

"So, what did Aikawa do?"

It seemed like Tomonori didn't really care about the trial anymore, and instead, she just wanted to hear Hiramatsu's story.

"Umm... well... it was just the other day..."

Sera was looking at Hiramatsu with a bold smile as Hiramatsu began her story.

Wait... why did she look so confident...?



Everyone, good evening. It's your favorite zombie, Aikawa Ayumu.

I think being the first to make a move is an important strategy in all things.

"Pon! I have three Tennous here! I win!"

"Yuki-chan... we're playing Hyakunin Isshu... not checkers."

What do you need to be the first? Well, you need luck and experience.

And also...

"Uwoh! Hiramatsu has a lot too! Let me flip some of your cards!"

"Eh? Yuki-chan... that's..."

Also, you need the physical and mental toughness to persevere in the presence of great sexiness!

"It's fine, it's fine. Just let me flip some. Gotta find the monk!"

"Yuki-chan... we're not playing that kind of Hyakunin Isshu right now..."

It's very difficult to do something faster than everyone else.





## **Chapter 6 – The Most Floor-Pounding Day of the Year**

### **Chapter 6: Part 1**

It was raining.

Raining cats and dogs.

A single boy stood there without an umbrella, completely still. He was like a frog waiting for the rain to pass or a snail.

Where had he left his umbrella? Why was he just standing there? These were all mysteries.

No matter what the answer was, the boy just stood there silently. Wait... no, he might have been crouching.

The rain hid the boy like a curtain, or maybe a mosaic.

I didn't understand. I didn't know who this boy was, or where this was supposed to be.

But, a single girl soon appeared in front of the boy. Or maybe it was a boy... it was hard to tell.

"You can... my... -brella."

Her voice seemed to vanish in the midst of the pouring rain. All I could understand was that she was offering her umbrella to the boy.

What a kind girl... wait, I really still didn't know if that was a girl or a boy. The rain made it hard to see anything.

The only thing I could see was that the girl (?) was smiling. I could see her (?) white teeth through the rain.

My mind began to fog, and I...

I woke up.

I heard a loud chime around me signaling that our lunch break was here.

Ugh, what a sentimental, bittersweet dream that was. It was also annoyingly hard to see anything in that dream.

Today was December 15th. It was a great day for a downpour... or it should've been.

Who the hell was with that little kid? Dammit, this didn't make me happy. Even the sound of fat raindrops beating against our window was starting to grate on my nerves, so I shook my head strongly from side to side to try and dispel the lingering memories of that dream.

Anyway, it had been a few days since Orito's mixer.

I wanted to contact the super legendary Underworld person that Yuu had told me about, the one who was supposed to be able to help me beat the strongest masou shoujo Chris. So, I thought about trying to talk to Anderson-kun, the only person I knew at school who might know about other denizens of the Underworld.

Well, granted, it remained to be seen if this person really was super and legendary.

Anyway, there might be people from the Underworld at this school other than Anderson-kun.

However, ever since that mixer, the handsome gentleman Anderson-kun was constantly surrounded by girls. There was no way an introverted zombie like myself could find an opening to talk with him.



Haruna and Tomonori might be able to brazenly push their way through all the rabid fangirls, but there's no way I had that kind of courage.

So, at the end of third period, I decided to get Tomonori to relay the message for me.

"Tomonori, I really need to talk to Anderson-kun about something, but it's hard to get close to him... so could you tell him that I want to meet with him? You're in the same class, right?"

That's what I ended up telling her.

Tomonori and Anderson-kun were in the same class. Thus, it was easier for her to approach him just when class ended, when there weren't a random gaggle of girls surrounding him.

"Got it! I'll do it! Also stop calling me Tomonori!"

Tomonori's incredibly tomboyish words were followed by a dependable little bow. Okay, I think everything should be fine now, but...

"Hey, Aikawa~~. I'm back!"

Tomonori came back during lunch break. She came back by herself...

"I told him what you said!"

"Okay. So, where exactly is he then?"

I probably sounded a bit annoyed right then, but Tomonori didn't seem to mind.

"He said he loves you too!"

She gave me an incredibly tomboyish thumbs up.

... Wait, what the hell?! Exactly what did Tomonori tell Anderson-kun?! Ugh, now I'm blushing!

I was now deeply regretting letting this idiot Tomonori be my messenger.

"By the way, Aikawa, let's do a bit of studying for the afternoon!"

"Got it. Let me finish eating first..."

Tomonori looked blankly down at me as I held my head in my arms. It seemed my strategy to get her to realize her mistake by acting extremely depressed had one hundred percent failed.

"You just ended up sleeping through fourth period and forgetting what I wanted you to say, didn't you?"

"Eh? Ahh, yeah. I mean, come on... this kind of rain always makes you hella sleepy, doesn't it?"

Well, admittedly I had been sleeping too...

"And I also had a pretty weird dream. I was like, a hero or something and I was raising up this fountain pen!"<sup>1</sup>

Hm, so Tomonori also had a weird dream? Just like me... I hope this rain didn't have some unpleasant ability to give people hallucinations or something.

"Dreams can take all your experiences and jumble them up into one, or show you your future self, or have lots of other fun surprises... but when the weather is bad, my dreams are usually pretty bad too."

I thought back to the hazy, annoying dream I had just experienced. So some of Tomonori's dreams were like that too?

"Got it. I'll forgive you this time."

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<sup>1</sup> Possibly a reference to the fact that HERO is a brand of fountain pens.



The past me. The future me. And a few illusions mixed in.

Which one of those categories did the dream I just had fit into?

I looked outside the window. The downpour showed no signs of stopping, and the rain continued to pelt against our window.

**Chapter 6: Part 2**

Tomonori quickly polished off her lunch, and we set up a game of Hyakunin Isshu Karuta<sup>1</sup>.

Our school happened to finish off the year with a school-wide Hyakunin Isshu tournament.

I really wanted to complain and say that we should be doing this in January instead, but I'm sure the school board had their reasons.

I really didn't care about this game, but Tomonori seemed to really be into it, so she's been dragging me into these games for three days now.

I stood up with the stack of cards containing the front halves of the poems, while Tomonori took my seat.

We had been doing this for three days so I didn't think she really needed to see the bottom-half of the cards to give me the correct answer. We were high schoolers, after all.

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<sup>1</sup> A rather strange but popular game in Japan that consists of players memorizing a series of poems and trying to complete the poems correctly when the first half of the poem is read out. The second halves of the poems are also on cards, and the person who completely identifies the poem completion can take the card.

"Rice field in autumn. A hermitage built from harvested grains. The woven mat is coarse."

I went in order and read out the top card.

"....."

She didn't even remember the first one?! What the hell has she been doing for the last three days?!

"I know this one! My sleeve is wet with dew."

Orito took that card causing Tomonori to complain.

"I had that oneeee~~~. Stop getting in the waaaay~~."

Tomonori frowned and glared at Orito who now was sitting in front of her with a satisfied look in his eyes. Next, we moved onto the second poem.

"Spring has passed, giving way to summer. White cloth gleams."

It seemed that Orito had learned a bit of tact. He clearly knew the answer but just stood there smiling and looking at Tomonori.

Tomonori looked at each bottom-half card laid out before her, and then she looked up at me with a serious look in her eyes.

"..... Can I use a protractor?"

What angle exactly did she want to measure? How would that even help? I actually was kinda curious!

"If you think it'll help, then go ahead."

"... Hung up to dry... at the foot of Mount Amanokuguyama."

I heard an angelic voice descend from the heavens and couldn't help but turn my head to the side to find the source of that beautiful sound. I found myself looking at a pigtailed girl who was smiling at us.

She was Hiramatsu Taeko. She was top of the class, and in a lot of ways, she was way too good to be a high schooler.

"Got it! Got it got it got it got it! I got the card, Aikawa! Just look at this! I got it, see?!"

"Tomonori, I'm pretty sure that counts as cheating."

Orito smacked Tomonori on the shoulder.

"Ah... maybe I'm just not cut out for Hyakunin Isshu..."

"Hiramatsu, you're supposed to be pretty good at this, right?"

"Ahh, yeah. During middle school, Hiramatsu went to a National Hyakunin Isshu tournament and took six thousand cards in a row. It shook the Karuta world to its very core."

Orito, I wasn't asking you. But before I could say that, he had already finished his explanation.

"Hmm, that's pretty amazing."

"That's... it's not... a big deal..."

Hiramatsu waved her hands from side to side, trying to lessen the impact of Orito's words. Orito just smiled and occasionally interjected with things like "no, really."

"I think Hiramatsu is the only person in the world who would be able to win a national tournament without losing a single card."

"Do you have any tricks you can share?"

Tomonori clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back in my chair.

"... Hmm... well... if you only need to win..."

"So there is something?! The queen of all certain victory tricks or something?! Tell me, tell me!"

"Why are you so desperate to win here, Tomonori? Did something happen?"

She probably had a really stupid reason for this...

"Why do I want to win, you ask? Cuz there's a big tournament, of course!"

Yup, her reason was as stupid as expected! God, she looks so proud of herself too...

"Well, I guess you could try to learn just the first five syllables of the top half of the poem... and the last five syllables of the bottom half..."

"Ohh! That's amazing! That way I only have to remember half... nah, only thirty fifty percent!"

I think she meant thirty-five percent there... well, to be honest, I'm not sure what exactly she was calculating anyway.

And so, Tomonori's intense Hyakunin Isshu boot camp training restarted under Hiramatsu's supervision.

Thirty minutes later...

"I've mastered the poem by Emperor Go-Toba!"

"Only one? Well, I guess that's pretty impressive for Tomonori."

"Why exactly did you pick that verse?"

Orito asked that. Tomonori gave him a confident look as if the reason was obvious.

"Because it makes me feel like I'm in Aura Battler!"<sup>2</sup>

I had no idea what she was talking about.

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<sup>2</sup> Anime from the 1980s.

Hiramatsu and I were both staring at her vacantly, so Tomonori seemed to get a bit nervous.

"A-Anyways! Let's go off to battle!"

Tomonori stood up and pointed outside the window.

We couldn't see very well through the rain, but she was probably pointing to the gym.

The break was close to being over, so we all decided to head for the gym.

We passed through a hallway as the rain beat a loud drum solo on the roof and went into the gym. Everyone was trying to evade the rain, so we all ended up lining up and passing through this hallway, like a long stream of ants carrying food back to the anthill.

But in the middle of all these people, one person suddenly stopped walking.

A pigtailed girl just looked up at the sky with a hint of sadness in her eyes.

"Something the matter, Hiramatsu?"



Even though I was one of the shier people at this school, I couldn't help but call out to her after seeing her look so downcast.

"A... Aikawa-kun... the rain is pretty strong today, isn't it...?"

She looked like she was spacing out, but I think it was more like she was thinking hard about something. I couldn't bring myself to ask though.

The entire school was now sitting inside this gym. Each class formed a line, and after the principal gave out a few words of thanks, the Hyakunin Isshu tournament finally began.

The prize for the winner was a ballpoint pen. Wow, way to kill my motivation. At least make the prize money or something...

I was put in the same group as Orito, and we sat in the traditional Japanese way in front of a fully laid out Hyakunin Isshu Karuta board.

"Well then, we will now begin the first match."

I heard someone speaking into a microphone. It was a handsome, rather familiar voice.

When I looked up, I saw that Anderson-kun and Mihara were next to the microphone. They weren't even part of the student council so why were they up there mixing with the teachers...?

"Why are those two up there...?"

"Ahh, they're on the event committee for this tournament."

This might be my chance. I had wanted to ask Anderson-kun some stuff today anyway. This was a good opportunity to get to him.

I would win this tournament, and while I was getting my prize, I'd tell Anderson-kun that I needed to talk with him later. It was a perfect plan. A wonderful, amazing plan! I suddenly felt myself going from zero to a thousand percent motivation to win this thing!

"Everything begins here..."

Hearing Anderson's voice, I immediately smacked the ground.

"The Gates of Ousaka... by Semimaru."

This poem by Semimaru was one of my favorites. There was no way I'd let anybody else take this card.

The others in my group looked at me in shock after seeing me immediately take that one card.

Every little part of their faces told me how utterly surprised they were that I wasn't completely useless.

This feeling of joy... it was incredible!

Like this, Orito and I completely destroyed the first match.

In our arsenal, we each had thirty poems that we had memorized, together with another twenty that we had partially learned using Hiramatsu's trick. So, put together, we knew a hundred poems. It wasn't enough to guarantee that we'd get every card, but this should be more than enough against a normal high schooler. It kinda made me feel guilty when I thought about the people who had worked way too hard to memorize everything though...

The second match passed, and then the third, and then the fourth. Things were going smoothly as Orito and I advanced further and further in the tournament. But...

We hit our first wall during the semifinals.

"Hello, my darling. How are you this fine day?"

It was the vampire ninja, Saras. As her appearance might suggest, she was an invincible armada of unparalleled beauty and intelligence and athleticism and scholastic achievement and everything else.

She was one year above me in school, but this tournament included everyone in the school so it wasn't too strange seeing her as my opponent. I could easily imagine that she would be a dangerous adversary.

She swept her long, black hair upwards, put a hand on her hips, and stood there looking quite formidable. Her long legs extended from her tall body and were planted atop the ground right in front of where I was sitting.

"... Why exactly are you standing up?"

"So I can better look down at you, my darling."

She crossed her arms and looked down at me, her eyes brimming with confidence.

"From the peaks of Mount Tsukubane-"

Hearing Anderson-kun's voice, Saras thrust out one of her long, beautiful legs which were clad in black stockings. Her skirt fluttered.

"I-I can't go on, Aikawa. This is it for me."

Orito no longer seemed to be able to concentrate on the Karuta.

He was so preoccupied with the mysteries of what lay up that skirt that he couldn't keep his eyes on the cards.

What a devilish plan this was! Of course, when a guy was presented with a chance to look up a girl's skirt, it was an ironclad rule that he would have to try.

I admit that I was also pretty tempted...

But Orito was the very embodiment of perversion, so I wasn't surprised that this would knock him out cold.

The other boys around us also had their gazes nailed to Saras's skirt, which was waving to and fro right next to her buttocks.

"Wake up, Orito! Even if you looked up her skirt, it's just her stockings! There aren't any panties!"

Orito's eyes widened at my words. And then, he slapped me across my cheek.

"You idiot! Aikawa! It's not stockings! It's pantyhose!"

Wait... *that's* the part that got him angry? Geez, this guy was just so unreliable.

"If you would like a peak, then help yourself, but I will be taking this match."

Dammit! Now all the boys were starting to gather beneath Saras to get a good angle for looking up her skirt. Damn her and that unconcerned personality of hers!

Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! I wanted to look too! Of course I would also want to look!

Giving into my temptation, I tried to lift my head, but then I felt a foot come forcefully down on the back of my head.

"Umm... I thought you were okay with people looking..."

"I won't show anything to you, my filthy piece of shit darling."

Why was my pet name getting worse and worse? Seriously, just "shit darling" is fine...

"Why not?"

"It's... because I'm embarrassed, of course."

A hint of pink leaked into Saras's cheeks. Ugh, what a tsundere.

I continued to take card after card while Saras kept her foot on the back of my head.

Just take the foot off, dammit. Exactly how long were you planning to keep that thing there?

Orito was taking Karuta cards while staring up Saras's skirt. He could only do that because of the excellent peripheral vision he had developed through years of being a huge pervert. He truly was a pervert in a class of his own.

Orito and I ultimately managed to survive that match.

Saras hadn't managed to take a single card, probably because she was stepping on me for the entire duration of the match.

"Oh." Saras seemed a bit at a loss for words.

I pushed her leg off me and stood up.

"Sorry, but looks like I won."

"Indeed, I have been soundly defeated. I had not even noticed that the match had ended."

"What do you mean?"

"I was so entranced by my garbage darling's hipline that I didn't even notice our time had run out."

Well, yeah, I had been pretty much crushed down to the floor the entire match, so my butt was probably sticking out pretty far...

"Just seeing that is enough to sate my appetite. So go on and win, darling."

Saras spun around on her heels and left. I watched her straight, long hair waving to and fro, and felt intense regret that I hadn't gotten a peek at her stock... her pantyhose.

"Well then, we're off to the finals. Our opponents will be..."



Hiramatsu and... Tomonori!

Tomonori?! Impossible! The only poem she had memorized was poem 99 by Emperor Go-toba, so how the hell had she made the finals?!

"To think we'd have only first years in the finals. Now then, who shall prevail?!"

Anderson-kun's voice echoed through the gym, and the students who had already been knocked out of the tournament cheered. Some of the students who were still hurting from their losses were playing their own games of Hyakunin Isshu. Well, it's not like they had anything else to do.

I looked at the pigtailed girl sitting politely in front of me. I had managed to get this far in the tournament because of Hiramatsu in the first place.

But, that's why... I would beat her. And then, I would talk with Anderson-kun!

My favorite Semimaru poem was right in front of my eyes. This must be a sign from the Heavens telling me to win this match.

Anderson-kun began to read the first poem of the finals.

"The G-"

"Here..." *Smack.*

Ahh... my Semimaru...

"Doors of Y-"

"Here..." *Smack.*

..... What was with that insane speed?! It took two syllables for her to know exactly what the poem was! She didn't just know the poems... she had rapidly memorized where every single card was on the board as well.

There was no way I could beat this...

"Yuki-chan."

*Smack.* After Hiramatsu called her name, Tomonori hit the ground like she was trying to swat a fly.

"Woohooooo, got one! I'll get this one next!"

"Okay... understood."

I see. Hiramatsu was a very nice person, so she was signaling Tomonori. Tomonori wanted to take the card closest to her, so whenever that poem was read, Hiramatsu would call her name. That's how she got carried all the way to the finals.

"Tomonori, that's so dirty! That's so not manly of you! Not manly at all!"

Orito complained, which caused Tomonori to frown.

"I'm not a man!"

Quick hands stampeded over more and more of the board. Soon, I found that all the cards in front of me had already been taken.

I knew I had to do something here to stop her, but I couldn't do a single thing.

If Hiramatsu could recognize a poem from two syllables, then we wouldn't be able to touch her. All we could do was sit silently and get crushed.

In the end, Tomonori rose to victory.

"Hey, you guys running this thing!"

Orito desperately called out, tears streaming from his eyes.

"... What is it?" Anderson-kun responded, looking at Orito like he would a criminal suspect.

"You sure you're happy with a final match like this?! Let's play with another set of cards! Another set!"

"You should just play the same game with famous lines from anime instead or something."

Mihara looked a bit tired and annoyed as she suggested that.

"Yeah, that! I don't think Hiramatsu knows a lot about anime, so that's good!"

"Oh! That sounds like fun!"

Tomonori and Orito both seemed quite excited at this idea.

"Are you okay with this, Hiramatsu?"

I spoke up to Hiramatsu, my tone very apologetic.

"Yes... I don't mind..."

What an amazingly kind person... she was pretty much the very picture of the Virgin Mary.

And so, we cleaned up the current game of Hyakunin Isshu. In its place, we put down a hundred cards with famous lines from anime written on them.

The rules were slightly different from standard Hyakunin Isshu. Instead of a front half and a bottom half to each card, Anderson-kun would just start reading the cards and we would just have to find that card in the pile.

The three of us were fairly okay when it came to famous anime lines. But Hiramatsu would have to purely look for the cards on the floor to match what Anderson-kun was saying.

Like this, we should be evenly matched.

Ah! Actually, wasn't a minute ago a perfect opportunity to talk with Anderson-kun? Crap, I completely forgot. Oh well. The match has already started, so I'll have to worry about that later.

The first card...

"When this war is over... I'm gonna get married."

Anderson-kun put quite a bit of emotion into it when he read that line.

Umm... war is over... war is over...

"Here." *Smack.*

I had just found the card, but Hiramatsu was quicker and took it for herself.

The second card...

"There might be a criminal among us, so how do you expect me to just stand here with you all?! I'm going back to my room."

Criminal... criminal...

"Wooooo!! Got it, got it! My point!"

Ahh, Tomonori got to it before Hiramatsu. So it was possible. This was definitely possible!

"Let's go on 2chan for a bit and then study."

"Mine!"

Tomonori got two in a row?! Also... why were all these famous lines death flags?!

"There is no need for the Demon King to trouble himself with this. We will personally-"

Orito's glasses sparkled as he listened to Anderson-kun.

"I have this one!"

Orito swiped at the cards. Okay, we all get that you're super cool and all that so stop making such a mess! Look, now half the cards are flying all over the place!

Ugh, what a guy. Orito and I hurriedly picked up the cards that had gotten knocked away.

"Just leave this one to me and run! Hmph, don't worry. I'll catch up right away!"

Anderson-kun had already started on the next one, so we didn't have enough time to put all the cards back nice and neat.

"Ah... here."

But Hiramatsu got it!

Hiramatsu looked a bit unsure for a second, but then she took the card.

However, compared to Orito and Tomonori, the number of cards Hiramatsu had taken was incredibly small.

"Phew..." Hiramatsu sighed. I then heard the sound of rustling clothes as she began to undo her school uniform. She had loosened it to the point where I could catch a glimpse at the soft-looking valleys between her breasts.

Had she just entered into serious mode?

If I leaned forward just a bit, I could see her bra. No, Ayumu, don't look! Don't look at that light blue bra of hers!

"Thi-"

"Here." *Smack.*

"I'll d-"



"here." *Smack.*

It only took a single syllable for Hiramatsu to smack the correct card. It was like the entire board had transformed into Hiramatsu's territory.

"So... this moment has come at last."

Orito's glasses sparkled.

"What do you mean?"

"The number of cards remaining... that number has become small enough that it entered into Hiramatsu's perfect memory regime."

Perfect memory regime... it sounded cool and all, but I had no idea what he was talking about.

Well, what it probably meant was this:

The rest of the cards on the board were now pretty much within Hiramatsu's control.

And that wasn't all. Because she had untied her uniform like that, Orito and my eyes were now glued to her chest. Her pigtails were a nice accent to the whole picture, and you cannot even fathom how excited this made the two of us.

So, she had disabled her opponents, and also increased her own speed with this serious mode of hers.

This was bad... this was really bad. I shook my head fiercely, trying to dispel all the evil thoughts from my brain.

What should I do? Would this match really end with me not being able to take a single card? Wasn't there something I could do? Anything at all...

"If you see any misbehaving monsters, then just beat them to a pulp!"

This one... I knew this one. But... huh? Hiramatsu was also looking for it? No, she seemed completely at a loss.

What did this mean? Was the card missing?

Missing... at that thought, my mouth dropped open in realization.

Earlier, Orito had sent half the cards flying, and we had picked them all back up.

But maybe, we had missed a single card...

I looked to my side.

And indeed, there it was. A single card lay right in front of Orito, close to his body where he couldn't see it. There it was!

"If you see glittering treasure, pounce and take it for yourself. Have audacity and lightning speed..."<sup>3</sup>

As Orito looked all around in search for the card, I leapt at him and thrust him out of the way.

"Uwah! What the hell are you doing, Aikawa?!" But I ignored him.

Goooooooo!! I threw out my right hand with such force that I almost fell over.

Hiramatsu also seemed to notice the card, and quickly reached out for it as well.

"Victory... is there for my taking!"

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<sup>3</sup> The start of the opening from Slayers.

*Smack!* Hiramatsu's pale hand touched mine.

Perhaps she was a bit more sensitive to cold than I had imagined, but her hand felt chilly and slippery to the touch.

But yes... her hand was now touching mine. The back of my hand.

One card only. I had only managed to take a single card, but that didn't stop me from vigorously pumping my fists.

**Chapter 6: Part 3**

And so, the curtain fell on our Hyakunin Isshu tournament.

Tomonori ended up with the win. Hiramatsu had probably planned to push Tomonori to victory from the very start.

Tomonori happily accepted the ballpoint pen grand prize and was showered by applause from the other students.

Ultimately, I wasn't able to talk with Anderson-kun at all and just ended up hobbling back towards my own classroom. Right now, I was passing the hallway that connected the gym to the rest of the school.

The rain... still showed no signs of letting up.

Exactly how long was this rain planning to continue? Stupid, annoying rain...

Suddenly, I noticed a single girl looking up at the rain.

Her eyes were tinged with sadness as she looked up at the depressingly cloudy sky.

"Something wrong, Hiramatsu?"

I called out to that girl.

Hiramatsu had adjusted her school uniform and was back to her normal, proper self. She responded in a kind voice. "Aikawa-kun... thank you for a fun tournament."

"Why exactly did you let Tomonori win? I'm sure you could've won with a huge comeback victory if you actually tried."

"She... really wanted to win... it was like seeing someone's dreams come true... she was so cute... so I couldn't help it."

Dreams come true? Hmm... well, during lunch break Tomonori *had* mentioned that she had a dream about becoming a hero wielding a fountain pen. I see. The dream Tomonori had seen had been her own future. Well, she also worked hard to make that future become reality. It was all very much like her, to be honest.

"Well, she's definitely an idiot who's always running around like a headless chicken. So I admit, sometimes I want to help her out too."

"Fufu... I... think I agree."

"But, this was a first."

"... Hm?"

"The first time I beat you to the punch. You know, in the finals."

Hiramatsu looked at the floor and shook her head.

"No... it's the second time..."

"Hm? Nah, that's impossible. There's no way I would've ever gotten the jump on such a smart person before."

"It was... a rainy day just like this..."

Hiramatsu once again looked up at the sky with sad eyes.

"It was... the day I met Aikawa-kun..."

The day we met? Hmm... we were classmates though, so of course we saw each other all the time.

"We were in fifth grade... and I... I found an abandoned puppy on the way home from school."

Her words began to trigger a hazy image in the back of my head.

It was that dream again... that vague, annoying dream I had seen right before the lunch break.

I suddenly remembered that next to the boy in the dream was an abandoned puppy in a faded cardboard box.

I see. That boy had actually been a girl... it was Hiramatsu.

"We... weren't allowed to have dogs in my house... but I wanted... I wanted to at least lend it an umbrella..."

I see. In that dream, Hiramatsu had already lent the puppy her umbrella and was getting wet from the rain.

Ahh, I felt so much better now after having cleared that dream up.

"But I... didn't want to get wet... so I ended up going home."



Hm? Wait, I thought in the dream Hiramatsu had given the puppy her umbrella, and then I came and lent her my umbrella. Was that wrong?

"But... I was worried about the puppy... so I wanted to at least move him somewhere... and then go home and bring back another umbrella... but when I came back Aikawa-kun was there..."

Those words dispelled the remaining mist in the dream.

Yes. That boy... it had been me. I was the boy who was standing there.

But, had something like that really happened? I couldn't remember at all.

"Aikawa-kun... he didn't mind getting wet, but gave the puppy his umbrella... and I thought... this was a really amazing person..."

"Sorry, but I can't really remember any of this... did something like that really happen?"

"Aikawa-kun... is very kind... so he must have done a lot of things like that... maybe that's why he can't remember..."

I wonder. Her story really didn't ring a bell though... I wracked my brains trying to remember, but the only thing that came to mind was the dream I had just had.

"So... today is the second time... Aikawa-kun has beaten me..."

"Did Hiramatsu lend me her umbrella back then?"

I see. If that boy had been me, and if that was the place I had met Hiramatsu...

"Yes..." Hiramatsu nodded. And then, she continued.

"I... ever since that day... I've always been watching Aikawa-kun..."

Hiramatsu always had a bit of trouble looking people in the eyes while she talked. Her cheeks flushed slightly, and her words cut off for a little bit.

But then... she looked me straight in the eye and spoke.

"I... always wanted... to be more like Aikawa-kun..."

I felt my heart starting to beat out my chest. I felt elated and slightly embarrassed as happiness ran through my entire body.

"I wanted... to be like Aikawa-kun... and try to do things for others..."



Even despite all her words, I still couldn't remember anything. What did I say to her back then? What did I do afterwards? Did I make sure to return Hiramatsu's umbrella to her?

Hiramatsu seemed to sense what I was thinking.

"I... have a lot of confidence in my memory... you know?"

And then, for the first time in my life, I saw Hiramatsu giving me a full-toothed, bright smile.

No, wait, the girl in my dream had done the same.

So... I guess this was the second time.

**Chapter 6: Part 4**

"I think... everyone must have seen this side of Aikawa-kun... he jokes around... and pulls you to your feet... he is a nice person..."

"Do you really think that you can turn this trial in your favor with just that story? Don't be absurd."

Sera shook her head in slight disbelief.

"There were plenty of points in that story when he was clearly sexually harassing someone!" Orito raised his own objection.

"Yeah! Don't try to screw with us!" Haruna's ahoge jumped from side to side.

"Eh? ... Umm..."

Hiramatsu seemed at a loss when she saw that things weren't going as she had expected.

"But... I guess that's better than expected coming from Aikawa. I'm pleasantly surprised."

Oh, juror Mihara seemed to be revising her opinion of me! Yuu also nodded. Maybe now I can actually get acquitted?

**Let us proceed to the judgment.**

A commotion rose through the jury as each juror readied what looked like two cards.

"Those who vote guilty please raise your red placard. Those who vote innocent please raise your blue placard."

Yuu: blue. Innocent.

Anderson-kun: blue. Innocent.

Mihara: red. Guilty.

Hiramatsu: blue. Innocent.

At this point, it seemed my acquittal was guaranteed. I pat my chest in relief. But... why did Sera still not look worried in the least? She glanced to the side, and following her gaze... I saw that Orito had not yet raised his placard.

"Well then... I'd like to speak to all the girls here." Orito had a serious look in his eyes as he pushed up his glasses with his index finger.

"Certainly, it is true that Aikawa has continued to sexually harass people. However, that is only from a girl's perspective; it seems to me that sexual harassment was never his intention."

Ohh, good job Orito! Keep going!

"I can also understand how you might want to make a pass at a girl who you like."

Anderson-kun also backed me up. I spread my arms out to try and put the finishing touches on this.

"Yes! All of that... it's nothing but an expression of my love!"

When I answered with that, Orito raised up a red placard. Huh? Wasn't he supporting me just a second ago?

"As proof of that... other than that time he kissed me... I've never seen Aikawa being kind to me! That kiss was filled with more love than Aikawa has ever shown me before!"

This guy was seriously disgusting. A bolt of lightning seemed to run through the A/V room at his words.

"This does not seem to be about sexual harassment anymore..."

Sera said that through a sigh.

"Uwaah... so it doesn't matter if it's a guy or a girl."

Mihara mumbled that. Eh? No, that's completely not it. Wait, I didn't like where this was going...

I had to change the subject.

"Oh, right, that Hyakunin Isshu story reminded me. I have to talk with you, Anderson-kun."

"Don't tell me... a confession?!"

Anderson-kun flushed red as he yelled out in shock.

"H-He's a pervert! As expected, he's a huge pervert!"



Haruna raised a ruckus while Orito sat back and let out a satisfied chuckle.

That bastard did me in... he had made everyone think I was gay.

This wasn't good. All I had wanted to do was to ask Anderson-kun about the strongest person from the Underworld...

"It seems... we'll need another trial at a later date."

Sera's cold eyes pierced me like daggers.

"No, I just wanted to ask Anderson-kun to introduce me to someone..."

"Uh, sorry Aikawa... I don't think I know many people... like that..."

"I'm not asking you to introduce me to someone like HG!"

"Your Honor, we request a judgment on Aikawa Ayumu Hard Gay here."<sup>1</sup>

"No! You're getting it all wrong! Listen to what I'm saying!"

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<sup>1</sup> HG (from the previous line) is short for Razor Ramon Hard Gay, the stage name of Masaki Sumitani, a Japanese comedian and retired wrestler.

**You have the right to remain silent.**

I didn't want to hear anything anymore. This was just breaking my heart. You've got it wrong, Yuu... stop looking at me like that.

At that point, even Anderson-kun changed his judgment from blue to red.

Tomonori couldn't say anything in my defense anymore either.

That bastard Orito... he had turned the situation against me. Now he was sitting there with that disgusting smile on his face. Dammit, this was a rigged trial from the beginning, wasn't it? And Sera had looked so calm the entire time because she knew this was coming. This final, deadly attack.

*Bang bang.* Haruna hit her desk with vigor.

"Enough! No more yelling!"

"That's what she said last night."

I tried to crack a joke in order to lighten the mood.

"Uwah! More sexual harassment!"

Mihara seemed taken aback and raised her red placard even further into the air.<sup>2</sup>

Crap. I probably should've been a bit more careful with what I said.

"The accused is hereby declared to be gross! Therefore he is guilty!"

Wow, that was frank.

"And his punishment?"

"He must perform an interpretive dance in front of Akihabara Station!"

That's no better than a death sentence!

"Sounds like a punishment we could use for an anime ending."

"Who would want to see that?! Seriously, give me a break! Just give me a break this once!"

"Your desperation is quite disgusting."

---

<sup>2</sup> It says in the novel that she changed her vote from blue to red, but this must be a mistake by the author since she originally had voted red in the first place.

"Seriously, I'll do anything else! Just not that..."

"Hmm... what else do we have around here then?"

"Well... we have a pot of water that just boiled over, a pair of glasses, and..."

What were they planning to do with those things? Hey, come on, tell me...

"We also have a Japanese katana."

They seriously were dead set on the death penalty, weren't they?!

"Okay, so looks like we're down to three options. We cut open his stomach, we burn out his eyes by using the glasses as a focusing lens, or we pour boiling water over him."

For a zombie like me, the stomach option was probably the easiest, but I really wanted to avoid revealing to all my classmates that I was a zombie.

"Please choose."

"Okay... the boiling water then."

"Done! Ayumu is sentenced to having boiling water poured over his head!"

"For how many seconds?"

"Well, if you search the record this time for words like 'boobs' and 'breasts' and 'nipples,' then you'll get 55 hits. So let's do it for 55 minutes."

"That's just torture! Worse than torture! I don't think the pot is that big either!"

"I thought things might end this way, so I already did the prep work! Everyone, onwards to the next room!"

Haruna seemed really excited now and took everyone into the neighboring room. I saw a single chair in that room, and after sitting down in that chair I noticed a balloon thing above my head. There was a cord or something attached to the balloon.

"So, you cut this cord here, and then the balloon breaks open and the boiling water comes down."

I see. That's what they were going to use the Japanese katana for.

"Who wants to cut the cord?"

At Sera's words, everyone in the room raised their hands together.

"Maybe Yuu or Hiramatsu should do it?"

**I cannot.**

"I can't either..."

"What about me? Hey, what about me? After all, I'm his wife, so I should be the one to punish him for the bad things he's done!"

"It's not like I really think of you as my wife... seriously, just let Hiramatsu or Yuu do it..."

"Uwah, he seriously only cares about guys, doesn't he?"

Mihara and Orito began to mumble to each other while giving me a scornful look.

"Okay, fine, let my wife or whatever do it then! But let Hiramatsu do it with her!"

"... Eh... but..."

"Please, Hiramatsu. Just do this for me. Tomonori is an idiot, so I'd be nervous if she did it alone."

"Eh? So this means Hiramatsu is also your wife?"

"Yeah, let's go with that. They're both my brides!"

"Aikawa... kun..."

Ugh, crap. I was already just so resigned to this situation that I was just saying whatever random thing came to mind. Sera and Yuu probably knew that I was speaking before thinking, but...

"Umm... I... I don't..."

Hiramatsu used her hands to cover her flushed cheeks. Had she taken my words seriously?

"It's fine, it's fine! Let's do it together, Hiramatsu!"

Tomonori seemed super excited about doling out this punishment and ended up dragging an apologetic-looking Hiramatsu by the hand to where I was sitting. Hiramatsu picked up the Japanese katana. It was probably the first time she's held something like that. Her pale hands were trembling.

"This... it feels almost like a marriage ceremony."

"Is that... so...?"

Hiramatsu's hands continued to tremble, but Tomonori gently put her own hands over Hiramatsu's.

"You'll be fine. I'm here for you, okay?"

"... Yuki-chan."

"Hey, Tomonori, shouldn't you be saying that to me? Hiramatsu, go for it. You're the one who has to do this."

If any of my usual crowd did this, they'd probably add lots of "fun," unpleasant extras to the punishment. So if someone had to do it, I'd prefer Hiramatsu...

"Aikawa-kun... I don't really understand but... understood."

Hiramatsu stopped trembling. She gave me a serious look and gripped the Japanese katana tightly.



I rested my hands atop my knees. I sat in this room that was empty except for that balloon and this chair, and I quietly awaited my fate with my eyes shut, like a daimyo who had just been told he was to have his belly sliced open.

I will accept it. The reality that I'm guilty of sexual harassment... and this punishment.

"Cut the cake, now!"<sup>3</sup>

Together with that announcement (which honestly would've sounded more appropriate at a wedding ceremony), Tomonori and Hiramatsu swung the Japanese katana down.

*Krchh!*

H-H-Hoooooooootttt!!! Scalding water poured onto me, water that was sixty-three times hotter than I had imagined.

Ice! I need ice! It's like how in variety shows they always have some ice ready offstage! Someone bring me that ice!

I writhed in pain, and all the while, Sera continued looking down at me with an expression of glee.

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<sup>3</sup> There's a pun here, since "keiki" means "prison term" but also can be the word for cake.

"We now declare this case to be settled!"

Who are you supposed to be, some Edo-era town magistrate? I wanted to shout that at Haruna as she gave me a harsh look with her ahoge standing straight up.

I glared at Orito, who was still looking very smug. If he hadn't been here, I would've made it out of this unscathed. Sera looked at me and also let out a sigh, seeing that everything had finally come to an end.

"My my... let us move to the next item on the docket then."

Next item, she said...? I looked around and noticed that I wasn't the only person who seemed a bit confused.

"The defendant is that piece of trash with the glasses!"

"Eh? Ehhhhh? Nobody told me about this!"

Haruna pointed at Orito with a smile on her face and her ahoge jumping from side to side. In response, Orito let out a "nobody told me about this!" that would've put the Dachou Club comedy trio to shame.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The line "Nobody told me about this!" is one of their most famous gags.

"It seems you thought this was only about Ayumu and let your guard down too much."

Anderson-kun chuckled. Did the jurors know this was going to happen?

"Ugh... that's... no..."

Orito hung his head, completely depressed.

What goes around comes around. Orito might've caused me a lot of pain today, but now an equal amount of pain awaited him.

"Nyahahaha! Serves you right!"

Haruna put her hands on her hips and gave Orito a self-satisfied smirk.

She really did seem like she was having fun. Having fun at other people's expense that is.

"Haruna. After we deal with this trash it's your turn, okay?"

"Eh?" Haruna blinked twice after hearing Sera's words.

**After this, Haruna will be put on trial for being selfish.**

"Eh? Seriously?" Haruna looked twice at Yuu's memo.

"Okay! I'll be the judge for that one!"

I stood right up off my chair, even as steam continued to rise from my head. Haruna probably understood now more than anybody else how difficult it'd be for her to walk away with an innocent verdict from this trial.

She glanced at the window. Sera, Yuu, and I all immediately knew what she was thinking.

"Don't let her get away!" Right when I shouted, Haruna and Sera both made a mad dash for the window.

Sera was a ninja though, so Haruna had no hopes of beating her in speed. Before she could even get a hand on the windowsill, Sera had caught her.

"Get off! Get. Off. Of. Me. Now!"

"Your desperation will not bear fruit here, Haruna."

**We should hold Haruna's trial first.**

"You're right. She might try to run again."

"Stop screwing with me! Stop it!"

"Master, don't worry! I'll be your lawyer!"

"No! Get Yukinori away from me! Stop, shocker!<sup>5</sup> I'll kill you!"

As Haruna raised a big ruckus, she was dragged by four people back to the A/V room.

I calmly donned the black judge's robes and sat on the judge's platform.

-

"Now then... would the accused, Haruna, please enter the courtroom?"

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<sup>5</sup> A reference to Kamen Rider, and also possibly a parody of Kamen Rider by the Tunnels (a Japanese comedy group).

*Bang bang.* I took the hammer, feeling refreshed, and banged it twice on the makeshift red ink seal in front of me.

### Credits

Project Leader and Translator : NanoDesu

Supervisor : Whitesora

Editor : Mithradates, KH. Hayate, Einander, ChappalChor4, CoffeeFlux

Typesetter : DevilHands

*Translation Group : NanoDesu Translations*